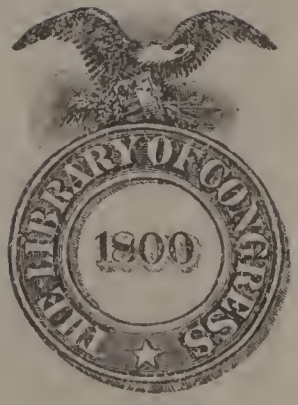
NOBODY KNOWS

DOUGLAS GOLDRING



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BY

DOUGLAS GOLDRING

"De toutes les aberrations sexuelles, la plus singulière est peut-être encore la chasteté."

Rémy de Gourmont

"Oh yet we trust that somehow good . . ."

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NOTE

All the characters and incidents in this story are purely fictitious. There is no reference to any real person, living or dead.

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TO

ABANY COOMAR BANERJEE

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CHAPTER I

THEIR situation had been on the verge of hopelessness for some months past, but always hitherto there had been at least something to pawn, some books to sell, or a stray cheque for a stray article, or a friend who would lend five pounds for the sake of the baby. Something had always turned up in the nick of time—usually in time to enable Gilbert Vayle to wipe away his wife's tears before dinner, to take her to a Soho restaurant and to dance at Chelsea. This evening, however, it looked as if there were to be no reprieve. The tradesmen had refused to supply any more food, and the landlord, tired of demanding rent, was now clamouring merely for possession of his premises. They had accepted an invitation to dine at Hampstead, but it was impossible for them to go. Gilbert junior was wailing, and they had quarrelled with the woman in the ground floor flat, who usually consented to "keep an eye" on him when required. The 'bus fare to Hampstead

was sevenpence each way, two-and-fourpence, and they had only elevenpence between them. And Gilbert had been forced to pawn his evening clothes. There was nothing for it but to eat at home: a hunk of bread, a little milk, a wisp of tea.

Chloe Vayle "set about getting it" with large uncomely tears wandering across her cheeks. Her courage had held out fairly well. But this, with the scorching heat, the threatening thunderstorm which would not break, and the headache which would not go, had been too much for her. She thought of her comfortable home, the meals which arrived by clockwork, the nice maids with their white caps and their white aprons, the lovely baths, hot and cold. Seven years ago! How splendid and exciting it had seemed to be marrying a "man of letters" rather than a humdrum lawyer like her father. And the dreams which she had dreamt in those early days, dreams warmed by a devouring physical passion which had now utterly burned itself away! Gilbert would assuredly make a name for himself. They would know charming people and give delightful parties. And they would all read each other's books. And while Gilbert was writing, she would be at work in her studio, painting every day while the light held; famous too.

And then came the war—the five devastating years—and after it Gilbert's return to London with his unpopular views, his disordered nerves, his

neurasthenia, his "complexes." She supposed the Government were scoundrels all right, but surely he need not have written novels to prove it, which the libraries would not circulate and the reviewers tore to pieces. And they weren't even good novels! It was all very well to tell the truth and shame the devil—if you could afford it; all very well for a husband to get himself disliked for the sake of his principles, provided he could feed and clothe his wife and child. . . . And so many men younger than he, even men without half his talent, were making money. And the more money the younger writers made, the more contemptuous of Gilbert they became. Why not? They knew as well as she did that Gilbert had completely ruined his career. He never *would* make any money now. He had muffed his one chance, which was to get in with the Labour crowd, and now he wouldn't even do popular journalism. He didn't even try. Well, she loved him, of course; he was a dear idealist and could be a charming companion. What good friends they might be, if it weren't for the yoke that held them and the lack of money!

In silence Chloe thought these thoughts, while her boy, aged three, howled with the energy of despair, and would not be comforted even by bread and milky water. She thought her thoughts in silence, and in silence Gilbert Vayle received their impact. Of course she was right. She wouldn't be able to stick it much longer. Her love

for him, her already overstrained loyalty, couldn't be expected to last out until he recovered. He supposed that he would recover, but the post-war world bewildered him and he had not the will or the energy to recreate himself. The task of living on his wits exhausted every atom of his nervous vigour. Each morning, when he woke up penniless, he had to devise some means of raising the necessary shillings. One day's bright thought was to scrawl corrections, notes and so forth, in a few carefully prepared "author's copies" of an early book of verses for which American book collectors, on the strength of his pre-war reputation, had made inquiries. A bookseller in the Charing Cross Road gave him seven-and-sixpence each for these fakes. But now he had no single volume left of any of the twenty books he had published. They had all been put on the market as "author's copies," and the letters sent to him in his days of success by prosperous poets had all been looked out and sold, and all the presentation copies (sent to him during the years when he was an active reviewer) had been sold too. There was nothing left, no saleable relic from his previous prosperity. And he could not even write. He had not written a line fit to print for months, and the agony of this was even worse than the agony of watching his wife weep, his child go hungry. It was the agony of a living death. The joy of creation, who could describe it adequately? To be a writer, to be young, and to be unable any

longer to capture one's thoughts and pin them to paper, who could describe that bitterness with any adequacy either?

For a long time now his mind had been tortured with morbid fancies. He had enemies! There was a plot against him to drive him out of Grub Street. He had written scathingly, after the war, about the smug arrivistes of the trade of letters who had captured literary journalism and infected it with their own snobbery and commercialism, and they had not forgiven him. When his last book appeared they had maintained either a frigid silence or had abused him in a paragraph. They derided the critics who had praised his work, they pointedly ignored him when they advertised themselves and their friends by presenting addresses from "the writers of the younger generation" to some distinguished greybeard upon his hundredth birthday. His friends of the old days ceased to invite him to their houses, ceased even to recognize him in the street. The publishers who in time past had treated him with the civility accorded to a man with a possible future now considered him a detrimental to be discouraged—not good enough, because of his preposterous opinions, even to weed out their manuscripts at five shillings apiece. No: it was no good going on. Nothing to pawn; nothing to sell; an empty inkpot; an empty, aching head. . . .

The meal over, he watched his wife bending over the sink in their kitchen dining-room, washing

up teacups. The tears had dried on her cheeks, but her face was flushed and puffy under the eyes. She did not speak; and though he wanted to try to comfort her he was unable to force himself either into speech or action. A year ago he would have taken her in his arms and kissed away her unhappiness. Now, in his relations with Chloe he suffered from the same inhibitions which prevented him from writing. He was dried up, exhausted. And yet the one live thing about him was his love for her, his painful and enduring love.

While he sat watching her, sucking at an unfilled pipe, Chloe suddenly lifted her head and turning away from her housemaid's toil, gave him one darkling glance. It was like a silent scream, shattering the stillness of the hot evening. He shrank under it, turned from it as from a blow, and seizing his hat and stick fled into the stuffy street.

He did not know where he was going. He had no objective, no hope either of adventure or of escape, no volition. He felt hungry and thirsty, but he had no money to buy either food or drink.

For a long while he walked on with his mind in confusion, numbed with unhappiness. He walked down Warwick Road into Kensington High Street, then turned with a sense of relief into the familiar, friendly Church Street where in the old days he had been so happy, where his prospects, years before his marriage, had seemed so bright.

He began to think of those days, then to imagine that his great-uncle had died and left him five thousand pounds. It wasn't such an impossible contingency, after all. And here was a little house to be sold, in Holland Street. Just the thing for Chloe and the baby. He began to visualise the arrival of the lawyer's letter at the breakfast-table. The sensations of opening and reading the letter were vivid, intoxicating. Now he was half-way to the solicitor's office, now scrambling up the dark stairs to old Mr. Cawston's room. An instant more and he had in his hand a cheque for five hundred pounds on account, "pending the winding-up of the estate." That evening they paid up all the urgent bills. Even so they had over two hundred pounds left, and their rent was paid now a whole quarter in advance. "My dear Martin"—oh, what an intense delight it was to compose such letters —"I am afraid you must have given up all hope of receiving back the fifty pounds you so generously lent us . . . But at last our luck has changed and I am able to return it. I do so, my dear boy, with a thousand thanks, and with far more gratitude than I can possibly express. You can't think how the debt has been weighing on my mind, nor what a joy it is to be able to pay." They were all written to, every one of them, in terms almost of rapture. Gilbert's face became wreathed in smiles, so much so that the passers-by, of whom he was now altogether oblivious, turned to look at him as he walked on with rapid pace.

After the blazing heat of the day, the gentle night air was infinitely soothing. There was strange magic lurking in the shadows of the trees. Voices, coming from open, cavernous windows, echoed melodiously in the stillness, and it seemed as if the ugly streets had somehow been miraculously re-created. The swell of happiness in his heart bore him on in a kind of ecstasy. To walk through this city of romantic glamour became an eager joy. Anything might happen! He passed through streets of an exaggerated horror, and through streets of sheer beauty. The commonplace had disappeared, and he saw everything as if through new eyes. He came at last to a bridge across a canal. On the left the canal widened out into a lake with a tree-fringed island in the middle of it, a lake surrounded by tall palazzi from whose open, brightly lighted windows came the sound of music and of singing. Suddenly, from beneath the bridge, there glided a long black barge, followed by a second, then a third.

For some minutes Gilbert stood leaning over the parapet, watching the barges creep away past the island and disappear into the gloom, watching the shadowy water and the shining windows.

Glancing down from the sky was a roguish moon, reclining on his back—a jesting, provocative, knowing sort of old moon. The sight of him made Gilbert laugh aloud, without knowing why. Then, while he was laughing, he fancied that he heard his laughter echoed in a different key. He

turned sharply and saw a woman in a dark dress, with a gold fillet encircling her fair hair, standing by his side. Her dark blue eyes seemed to be dancing with amusement, but they were compassionate eyes. "When are you coming to me, Gilbert?" she asked, smiling up at him. "When are you coming to me?"

With a cry he stretched out his hands, but he encountered nothing save the rough stone of the parapet. She was gone. His dream was shattered. . . .

A great weariness came over him, as he dragged his way slowly back. What a long way there was to go! Miles and miles of dull streets! He wondered if he were going mad at last, and if they would take him to a county asylum or lock him up in some private home as a harmless "mental case." But nervous as his queer experience had made him, he was conscious nevertheless of a curious elation, the sort of elation that a man feels when he sees the first crocuses which herald spring.

When he got back to the frowsy tenement, called by courtesy a furnished flat, from which he was daily expecting to be ejected by the landlord, Chloe was already in bed and fast asleep. Her breast, uncovered to catch whatever breath of air might steal through the window, rose and fell with gentle regularity. Gilbert looked at her motionless, heavy eyelids, and at her gold-brown, silky hair crushed in a soft coil upon the pillow,

and suddenly he realised that the woman he had taken into his life, whom he had loved so dearly for eight harassing years, was a strange woman, strange and secret . . . and silent.

CHAPTER II

THE persistent howling of Gilbert junior, and the slow, tired movements of Chloe were the first sounds which came to Vayle's ears when he woke up. But instead of filling him with terror and depression, this morning they merely awakened his interest. He was conscious of an agreeable detachment, a detachment which was all the more delightful because he felt it to be wicked. The misery into which his dependents had been plunged was a misery for which he was responsible, a misery which hitherto he had shared to the full. But to-day he did not share it. Something had happened to him, and with an invalid's keen interest in his own case, he looked forward to studying the new symptoms. He felt in a sense as if his soul had escaped from his body, as if he were living in another dimension. And he felt young, vigorous, happy. He jumped out of bed, walked into the kitchen in his pyjamas, patted Gillie's curly head, kissed his wife like an ardent lover and went singing to his bath. Chloe received his embrace amiably but without a thrill. She, too, was preoccupied with her "case."

Vayle's elation lasted him all the way to Bedford Street, where he had an appointment with a

publisher. He was so unexpectedly cheerful that the publisher commissioned a book from him and gave him four books to "read" at a guinea apiece. Later, he called on his agent, borrowed twenty pounds which enabled him to meet his immediate liabilities, and gave him ten pounds in hand. He hurried home, delighted.

Chloe was out with the baby when he entered the flat, so he went to his writing-table, at which for so many long months he had not written, and tried to do some work. The commissioned book had long been sketched out. He read over the synopsis once more. As he read through the headings of the chapters, a clear vision of the completed work rose before him. In imagination he had already turned its pages. Passages in his essay on Art and Mysticism filled him with the authentic glow. One of his pet themes was that every creative artist must choose whether he will try to recapture a beauty already revealed, or spend his life in pursuit of the beauty which is always elusive, the strange beauty which hides her face from her pursuer but yet occasionally vouchsafes to him those momentary glimpses which are his supreme reward. There was a queer brotherhood of those who chose the harder road. They gave all they had. They gave up everything, sacrificed themselves and others, in the sacred quest. They were a curious lot. Some of them had talent and some had none. But that did not matter. What only mattered was their point of

view towards their work and the desire in their hearts. Why was it that there should be so much hatred between the two camps, those who achieved the comforting beauty and those who sought the dangerous? The former had most of the cash and most of the kudos. Why, couldn't they be content with their orderly lives, their social delights, pleasant houses, their honours, their distinctions and their fame? Why must they always be throwing stones over the barricade at the unfashionable (and usually hard-up) writers and painters whose standards were not their standards, whose joys were not their joys? It was a dog-in-the-manger sort of attitude. After all, they had the best seats at the world's table, and they had an enormous press in which to appreciate one another. Why couldn't they keep their pens away from what they couldn't understand?

Vayle had written "Chapter I" at the top of the page. When the scrunch of his wife's latch-key came to rouse him from his reverie, he saw with a shock of dismay that those words were all that he had written within the past two hours. And he had borrowed twenty pounds on the security of his contract, banking on his past fertility!

Chloe came in with their boy. She looked almost lighthearted. "Whom do you think I met, darling?" she said. "Miriam Carmichael. It was in Kensington Gardens. She asked why she hadn't seen us lately, so I said you were busy

on a new book. And she wants us to go round to-night, so of course I said we would. She wanted us to dine, but I told her it would be difficult to manage, on account of Gillie."

Vayle's face fell. The night—no, he could not give it up, not for all the famous literary women in the universe. That was asking too much. He could not. He thought of what might happen to him as a drug-taker thinks of his drug. It was robbing him of everything, to take away his dream-life, to incarcerate him with Miriam Carmichael!

"I can't possibly go, my dear," he said. "But you go, and make my apologies. Say I'm busy thinking out a new novel. It's quite true. Besides, she always liked you more than me."

"Oh, nonsense, Gilbert!" said Chloe, her dark eyes clouding and dilating. "It's ages since we've been anywhere together. I was so looking forward to it. We never go anywhere now. We never *see* each other as human beings, only in this awful pigsty. I do think you *might*." She was conscious, now, of her insincerity. Really, she preferred to go alone.

"My dear, how can I?" Vayle retorted, with a kind of despairing obstinacy. "If I'd had longer notice I might possibly have managed it. But to-night, I simply can't."

"Oh, very well." Chloe sighed. "If you don't want to, don't come."

At dinner, both Chloe and Gilbert were

abstracted, both absorbed in their own thoughts.

"You know, I think Miss Carmichael wants to adopt Gillie," Chloe observed when the meal was half over. "But we couldn't let him go, could we?"

"Wouldn't it be the best possible thing for the child?" Gilbert replied. "After all, she can afford to educate him decently and we can't."

"But, Gilbert, we may be able to, some day. Your books will catch on."

"They aren't written."

"But they *will* be, dearest. Do you think I haven't the most absolute faith in you? Of course I know you'll be a success one of these days. And when you are, all the good work you've done already will start selling again, and then you'll be comfortably off." He noticed that she did not say "we."

"It's problematical, anyway, as far as Gillie is concerned," he remarked. "The Carmichael, on the other hand, is a certainty."

"Oh, my dear," Chloe exclaimed in polite dismay, "don't lose faith in yourself."

"I was never farther from it," Vayle replied, with a curious secret laugh which angered his wife. He went on quickly, for fear he had been unkind to her. "After all, why should one lose faith in oneself because one ceases to be able to write books? Books are the expression of our thoughts and dreams. It is the thoughts . . . and the dreams which matter, and one does not

necessarily lose them if one loses the power to share them with others."

"No, dear, I suppose not," said Chloe, with rather laboured politeness. She felt that it was hopeless trying to understand what Gilbert meant when he was in one of his moods. It was just as well that he wasn't coming to Cheyne Walk. She felt more herself when he was not present. But wouldn't going out to other people's houses make him less queer? Oughtn't she to try once more to persuade him? No, it was no good. Oh, well. . . !

Gilbert started out with his wife, but parted from her at Earl's Court Tube Station. Retracing his steps, he walked on into Kensington High Street and turned into the familiar quiet of Holland Walk. The weather had changed suddenly, and was become cold and wet. The moon peered through the hurrying clouds with a yellow rheumy eye. Gilbert walked quickly. He was trembling with excitement, his heart beat noisily against his breast. When would "it" begin? Would he see her again to-night? Perhaps he ought to start "it" himself, as he had started it on the previous evening by imagining that an aged relative had died and left him five thousand pounds; by imagining that at last he had "rung the bell," written a world-famous novel, a great imaginative work, a book which even his enemies had been forced to appreciate, a book which *sold*. To think of imagining a masterpiece as written, published

and applauded, was to begin, actually, to do so. He was carried on a mile, swelling with his imaginary triumph. But every now and then the spectre of that blank page, blank save for the two words, "Chapter I," which waited for him on his writing table, rose before his mental vision and shattered his pleasant dream. This evening wasn't going to be a success. He could not get his curious drug. And how cold the wind had become! He stuffed his hands into the pockets of his shabby old raincoat and gathered it about him, hunching his shoulders. What should he do? He wandered for a while down side streets, "residential" streets, and looked into the brightly lighted houses where respectable Jewish families sat round their drawing-room tables behind their Nottingham-lace curtains. How could they possibly wish to show off such terrible interiors, he wondered. He was glad when he emerged from the Pembridge area into common cockney squalor. Young ladies from the Westbourne Grove shops were now encountered in giggling twos, followed by their young gentlemen—pathetic pseudo-sporting types, swishing the evening cane, wetting the end of the evening gasper, pursuing romance in their way, as he pursued it in his. To think that they all had money in the Post Office Savings Bank. Yes, they must all be saving up. What for? He passed a movie house and debated whether he should go in and have sevenpenceworth of Charlie. Dear Charlie! He was so familiar that it

was scarcely worth while enduring the stuffy atmosphere.

Close to the movie house, in a dark street round the corner, there lurked a silent, uninviting pub. Through the open door of the public bar Gilbert could see inanimate male forms lurching against the walls with pots of beer in their hands. A large-bosomed young woman in black silk, her puffy powdered face topped by a magnificent erection of red hair, stood motionless with one hand upon a polished lever. Behind her head, among the bottles and the looking-glasses, was the framed announcement, "No Cheques cashed." The saloon bar, the entrance to which was down a narrow alley, was more inviting because more mysterious. Its windows were shaded by red blinds, and the glass upon its door was so deeply frosted that the light shone but dimly through it. Gilbert turned the handle and pushed. He had to push hard because the automatic shutting apparatus was particularly stiff. When he got in, the warmth of the place was singularly agreeable. To his delight, it was a real "parlour." A gas-fire burnt in the hearth, the sofas round the walls were covered with red plush. A musical instrument which played a tune for a penny beamed from a far corner. It was a perfectly beautiful bar, and on the other side of the counter was the perfectly beautiful barmaid.

Gilbert deposited himself in a corner of the plush-covered sofa and ordered, with great

aplomb, a double Johnny Walker in a big glass with plenty of "splash." The perfectly beautiful barmaid turned her back upon him, in order to give him short measure—ten really short ones gave her a double for herself at closing-time; after all, it was pretty cold, and her American teeth ached that bad they might have been real ones—then she turned and smiled upon him as she squirted his "splash."

"Rather dull 'ere to-night," she observed, with the inimitable, languorous cockney good nature.

But Gilbert said he liked it as it was—warm and cosy and not too noisy. Miss Roberts sighed. She herself preferred noise and bustle, liked to see plenty of the fellows about, chaffing and kidding each other. "Oh, give me gay Paree," she said.

Gay Paree! Café life . . . the real sense of values . . . the dead-and-buried Bohemia. Of course, Paris in the old sense was all over now, poisoned by French politics . . . the French a dying race. But why did that charming good-fellowship among men with no furniture never seem to flourish in London? There must be so many others working at the trade of letters who not only had no furniture but didn't want any. He felt too lonely. After all, what did all that furniture business matter? A suit-case, the necessary clothes, a few shirts and collars, a pair of brown shoes with some very good brown polish, and a nice little brush and pad, these were all the

material possessions for which a reasonable man need have any use. Strange, too, how few people understood the delights of polishing brown leather. Fancy yielding to a servant those moments of ineffable joy! But to go back to Gay Paree. Bohemia was detestable, loathsome, as one knew it. Certainly it was. Sham artists in loud clothes apeing their betters, economising, too, in shaving soap; blathering about things they didn't understand; showing off erudition which they didn't possess; really waiting for the moment when they could "boom" and so migrate to Golder's Green Garden Suburb and buy a Ford car. Bohemianism was a disgusting thing erected upon something real and obscuring it. That something real was the artist's contempt for all forms and kinds of "furniture"—furniture of conventions, of ready-made political opinions, of "thought" chawed up, vomited and reassimilated a thousand times, furniture of family life, furniture of soul-aspiration, furniture of "home." Obscured by the pinchbeck Bohemian was the radiant figure of the *free man,* the citizen of this world, and the pilgrim towards the many other worlds which lie so far away—beyond the blue mountains. Gilbert was a little ashamed now of his own emotional gush, when, as he walked up Church Street, he had wallowed in an imaginary "success." After all, wasn't it better to be auto-erotic, a Narcissus solitary, than to sniff the incense of the flattery of fools . . . ?

A newcomer entered the bar while Gilbert sat absorbed in thought. At first he did not look up, but after a time he glanced at the new arrival, and recognized, to his intense amazement, Louis Mathers. The one and only Louis! When he was a boy of twenty he had met the great Louis in a café, as obscure as the pub in which he was now sitting, which smiled for those who knew the way there, in a dingy turning off the Boul' Mich'. Paris, of course, had been Paris in those days, and, for Gilbert, Mathers had been its most glamorous figure—Mathers, who had "run through a fortune," had spent ten years in North Africa, five in London as the husband of a rich American, and the rest of his adult life in France, in Italy, in Spain; Mathers, whose poetry was, of all the work produced in the past two decades, most likely to endure. This uncontrollable adventurer with the sarcasm of a Rimbaud, and (when he cared to exert them) both the charm and the capacities of a Casanova, had disappeared from human ken ages ago. Anyway, he had taken his outrageous chuckle, his Austrian hat, and his classic and unblushing non-morality out of England and of France, and nobody had heard of him since. Perhaps nobody except Gilbert had ever thought of him. But Gilbert had thought of him constantly, had thought of him and written about him. And now here he was, encountered, visible, audible.

"Well, young fellow-me-lad," said Mathers, cocking upon Vayle a naughty eye, "what are

you doing in this damned town, I should like to know?"

"Seeing it," Gilbert replied. "Seeing it for the first time in my life."

"But you can't see London from London," Mathers objected. "Now, Miss Roberts," he interposed, "don't you make eyes at Mr. Vayle in that roguish way. He's a very good young man, and he has just been having an intellectual conversation with himself."

"Oh, Mr. Mathers, you do like your joke, don't you now!" said Miss Roberts.

"You can go out with her if you like," Mathers continued genially, in an aside to Gilbert. "She doesn't mind on Saturday nights. That red hair ought to be rather pleasant when she lets it down. Nice smell. I like the smell of red hair. White skin, too. Damned fine figures these barmaids have. Wonder why it is? No, my dear boy," he went on, pointing his long insolent nose in Gilbert's direction, "you ought to see London from Africa, from Italy, from anywhere in the world except from its own back streets. Come to Italy now. Spit in the Grand Canal to show it what you think of it, eh? Take a draught of life, man, under a clear sky. Forget the furtive adulteries of Maida Vale, and all the cringing patent-leather souls who prance daily from Chancery Lane to Chiswick and hang poor Keats' portrait in their halls!"

"Such langwidge," observed Miss Roberts, not without hauteur. "I expect the gentleman knows how to treat a lady better nor what you do."

Mathers lay back on the sofa and laughed. A festive lewdness now irradiated his countenance. He reminded Gilbert of a Saviour with conscientious objections to crucifixion. He had relapsed back upon the beautiful world with a mission to put it in its place. Man should not sacrifice himself for humanity. It was more fitting, in 1920, to make a symbolic gesture expressive of contempt. Miss Roberts had not quite followed the argument. Indeed, she was obsessed with doubts as to whether he was really quite the gentleman.

"I go next week to Venice, to sniff the excremental smells still lingering about the ruins of that pleasant civilisation," said Mathers, heaving vast shoulders and smiling—faun-like, with slant grey eyes and horned grey hair. "Like my dear friend, Mr. Ralph Waldo Trine, I like to be in tune with the infinite. Come with me, Gilbert; it will do you good."

"Haven't any money," said Gilbert, hidebound in habitual gloom.

"Haven't any money!" sneered Mathers. "What has money to do with it, when you've twenty years more life in you than I have? Give Miss Roberts a kiss, my boy, and she'll hand you all her savings—and have, as Plato would say, a sense of gratitude besides."

"You're drunk, that's what it is," said Miss

Roberts. "Never sore you like it before, I *will* say that."

"You would, of course, dearie," Mathers rejoined. "But it's not the truth . . . far, far from it, alas! What do you know about drink in this benighted town which allows its publicans to sell vermouth as a liqueur at a shilling a sip, when they buy it at tenpence a litre? No, ducky, if you are talking of drink, let me describe to you the wines of Orvieto, of Frascati, of Montepulciano, of Capri. Let us talk of Nebiolo and of Falernian! Take my advice, Gilbert, leave your flat ginger-beer of domestic bliss, laced though it may be with the meagre vintage of Miss Roberts' embraces; leave it . . ."

"Well, it's closing-time, anyway, and 'igh time, too!"

"Time, please, gentlemen," rang the stentorian voice of the potman who was standing in his shirt-sleeves, brandishing the long pole with which, in a few moments, he would haul down the iron shutters of the "Prodigal's Return."

"Time, *please*! ! !"

"See you in Italy, Gilbert," said Mathers, as he departed, with a wave of his hand.

Gilbert put down his emptied glass and stretched himself. Somebody turned out the gas-fire. The penny-in-the-slot musical instrument seemed suddenly to become inanimate. The statuesque figures, discerned dimly in the four-ale bar,

moved stiffly and deposited their mugs on the sodden counter.

"Time, *please*! ! !" He felt unaccountably lonely now that Louis had faded away into a mirage of Italy.

CHAPTER III

WITHIN a few weeks Gilbert's dream-life, his "drug," had come almost entirely to absorb his thoughts and energies. The absent-minded residuum of his personality got through the daily routine of normal life with fair success, but there were frequent intervals when, to one who watched him as closely as his wife, he was "not there." What it was that had happened to him she could not guess, and he did not tell her. Once she nearly stumbled, unconsciously, upon his secret. At breakfast one morning she looked up from the Daily News and said to her husband: "Listen to this!" Then she read a paragraph from "Under the Clock":

"What is the explanation, asks a correspondent, of the appalling increase in the number of people who talk to themselves? I am frequently being passed in the streets by men and women walking alone who appear to be engaged in the most animated conversation with an invisible companion, and continue thus even as they glance at me. I suppose the victims of this melancholy habit are usually persons condemned to a solitary mode of life. The worst we do to them now is to wake them up to embarrassed self-conscious-

ness with a polite stare. In mediaeval times, especially if they were lonely old women, they were sometimes burnt at the stake or thrown down a well."

Chloe put down the paper and smiled across the table at her husband. "Do I do it?" he asked, with a blush.

"Yes, dear, of course you do. You make faces on the tops of omnibuses, laugh to yourself, frown, put on a society smile and gabble away as if you were at a tea-party. I watched you only the other day when you didn't see me. It made me quite nervous." She laughed again, and went on with her breakfast, while Gilbert wondered how long it would be before he really betrayed himself. He was getting terribly "queer," beyond a doubt. If he had possessed any money he would have consulted a specialist. Psycho-analysis might do the trick! He wondered, with a curiously detached interest, what on earth was going to happen to him.

"Can you give me any money to-day, dear?" Chloe asked, breaking in upon his reverie. She hated having to ask him, but something had to be done. She stood watching him with a spasm of pity while he turned out his pockets. He found a tattered ten shilling Treasury-note, a half-crown, eight pennies, a sixpence. "Can you manage with this?" he said, handing her the note. How stereotyped this dialogue was become! And "Are you sure you can spare it?" Chloe murmured—the

inevitable rejoiner! He opened his cigarette-case. He had two Gold Flakes left and would need twenty more—a shilling. He wanted two stamps, a bottle of Guinness, and his fare to Fleet Street and back. Yes, he could manage it.

"I hope you won't think it extravagant," Chloe went on, flushing slightly, "but I met Moyra Burden in the Park the other day when I was taking Gillie out, and I've asked her in to tea this afternoon. I must buy a cake." A cake! Why not? Wasn't it the alienable privilege of the pauper with no bread to eat cake? Chloe betrayed a nervous anxiety that he should stay in to meet her friend, which Gilbert was at a loss to understand. He promised, however, that he would stay in to tea. "She admires your books," said Chloe, "and she's awfully clever. She's a professor of English Literature at the Gurney College for Women."

Gilbert whistled profanely. "She doesn't *look* like a professor," said Chloe hastily, "so you needn't be frightened. She's an awfully pretty and charming Irish girl, and only twenty-eight."

Gilbert said nothing, but the mention of Ireland was like a breath upon the embers of an old enthusiasm. How he had worked, how unavailingly, how uselessly, to try to awaken his countrymen to a sense of the iniquity of coercing Ireland! Day after day he had written letters to the papers and sent them off; and not one had any paper ever printed. Then he had organized a

manifesto and got it signed by a hundred of the best-known English writers and painters, denouncing Hamar Greenwood and his Black-and-Tans. And the meetings which he had helped to organize! Ireland to him was a sort of holy land, half-way between two worlds. He was conscious of a distinct interest in Moyra Burden. Perhaps she might have news from Dublin, perhaps she would even sing some of the songs of her own country. . . . Gilbert felt himself drawn back, grappled with, held down. The "politics" which had ruined his work and sapped his nervous energy were getting hold of him again. He felt the old urge to go out into the street and tempt the brick-bats and the rotten eggs. "The instincts of the street-preacher rising in me," he thought. He tried hard to counteract the flood of his humanitarian emotions by thinking of what Louis Mathers had said to him in the pub. Let humanity stew in its own juice. The Manchester doctrine with modern frills! Perhaps every nation got the government it deserved. The thing to do was to look after oneself. Number One was really all that mattered. The joys of martyrdom were over-rated. And at least the collapse of the Continental exchanges made possible a migration to Germany, to Austria, perhaps even to Italy. No, he was jolly well not going to let this Irish girl, this Moyra Burden, drag him back into the forsaken paths of political "idealism." He was much too old and tired, much too detached, now. The anodyne which he

had taken was too potent, he had drunk too deeply of the milk of paradise. . . .

While he sat reviewing a ponderous "History of English Literature," Gilbert junior stalked impressively into the room. Gilbert senior gazed at him with a peculiar gloating dislike. "Daddy, I want choklits," said the child, over and over again. "I want choklits." But there was an excuse for not wasting one of his sixpences on buying the little beast any chocolates. Hadn't Gillie that very morning tried to stuff Charles, his cat, down the dust-shoot? The poor animal had been rescued only just in the nick of time. To think that he had begotten a cat-murderer whose *idée fixe* was chocolates! Horrible. What could Chloe have been thinking of. He shooed the child out of the room and went on with his work, glowing, yes, glowing with a sense of his own *méchanceté*. That was more like it! Enough of this detestable "kindness" and "niceness," this overflowing stream of glucose sentiment, these sacrifices for principle. He was through with them. Chocolates be damned—and children, too!

In the afternoon, thanks to a scanty luncheon—and to his elation at having scored off his offspring—he worked with unusual rapidity and concentration, and all thought of the approaching tea-party vanished from his mind. His pen was rushing over the paper as it had not rushed for nearly a year, when Chloe and her friend came into the tiny sitting-room. Before he looked up he finished his

sentence and slapped down the key-words for the next. Then he jumped to his feet with a word of apology, and was introduced to Moyra Burden. They shook hands with one another, and while the tea-time conversation continued in a placid stream he took stock of his wife's guest. She was wearing a pointed Russian cap of blue silk, trimmed with fur, a green silk jumper and a blue skirt. Her prominent, rather startled blue eyes sought his from time to time, while the flush of the repressed and hyper-sensitive sensualist covered at intervals her face and neck. She talked with a soft suggestion of brogue which always disarmed him, and she was tactful enough to let him see that she regarded him as a "personage."

Between Moyra and Chloe, Gilbert saw that there existed one of those friendships the nature of which is woman's most carefully guarded secret. They "understood" one another, but they were curiously shy together, curiously at arm's length; held apart, perhaps, and yet attracted by the fact that one of them was a mother, and one a virgin. . . .

They talked of pictures, of the theatres, of London, of music, of their friends, of books, and then of Ireland. Moyra told of her friends' experiences under the Terror, of the raids and murders, of the shootings and burnings in the neighbourhood of her own home, and of the sufferings of her friends and relatives. Her voice had the peculiar heart-breaking gentleness which is the

Irish heritage. "That's the way they get us," he said to himself, half angry at his own response. After all, what did it matter, all that? Ireland's sorrows were her own affair.

When Chloe excused herself on account of the baby—wasn't she throwing them together rather markedly?—Moyra went on talking of her home and her friends, and about the Dublin intellectuals and the Sinn Feiners and their courts. And she told him about her long walks into the mountains, about the loneliness of Sally Gap and the terrible silence and darkness of Glendalough, about the long white road up beyond Glencree where you never met anyone at all that was human, but where you felt all the time that invisible people were watching, listening, talking together, singing, and perhaps praying great prayers for the deliverance of Ireland. And it was so terrible to be cycling on an autumn afternoon on that road that you had to hurry back all down the long hill as hard as you could go, to be in Enniskerry before the darkness or even the twilight fell on you. But the grand teas you could have at Enniskerry, whether at Collins' Hotel or at the Powerscourt Arms! The Powerscourt Arms was nicer because it was in the middle of the town, and the farmers stopped their cars there, and you could hear them talking in the bar, and grand talk it was too, when they'd had a glass of Jameson apiece, or even before. For, as everyone knew, the Irish could talk on tea or on nothing. Didn't the Dublin intellectuals

talk for hours on a cup of tea and a couple of potato-cakes? And wasn't it the grandest talk, all about the future of the world and the break-up of the British Empire, and the grand things that would happen to Ireland when the Republic was recognized—the steamers that would ply from Galway to New York, and from Cork harbour to France, the coal-mines that would be worked, and the industries that would be developed by the I.A.O.S.

As she talked, Moyra forgot her audience, for she was stabbed by an agony of love for her country, the land from which she had so eagerly escaped. Ireland was like a prison to live in. And yet, if you had once lived upon its soil, it held you. England, London, by contrast, seemed to her curiously coarse—coarse, and subtle, and complicated. The London people were in some ways more friendly and easy-going, less suspicious and less calculating than the Dubliners . . . and yet, somehow——

She tried tactfully to put her ideas into words, while Gilbert squatted on a black pouff, with his pipe in his mouth, and watched her, nodding his head. She had taken off her cap, and his eye rested with admiration on her coiled brown hair and lithe boyish body. They were slipping into a friendship. . . . But when the talk left Ireland and drifted to literature the friendship nearly foundered. Had she been plain and spectacled instead of young and desirable, it would have

foundered quite. This book-talk was more than he could stand; it had a peculiar hysterical note which jarred his nerves. Verlaine, Baudelaire, W. B. Yeats—why, yes, of course. Very nice, too. But what about jam for tea, bathing in surf, the sunshine, grass, mountains and the clean cold air? Could she get nothing at first hand? Nothing. He could see that books were her life. She lectured about them, lived by them and for them, escaped away into them, and poured even her sexual energy into reading and absorbing them. These over-educated, book-sodden, pathological women wanted shaking. Clearly a job for a specialist.

The argument was growing heated when Chloe returned to see how they were getting on. And now he watched a curious spectacle. He watched Moyra set herself to charm them both by the exercise of a quality well understood, and deliberately exercised and directed. It was uncanny, like the octopus in the aquarium at Naples. The tentacles of her charm hung round him. He forgot his anger, and he did not want to shake them off. When she got up to go, he invited her to luncheon in two days' time. She accepted, with alacrity, and she paused at the door to tell him how greatly his last novel had appealed to her.

"There now!" said Chloe, as the door closed behind Moyra. Chloe looked as happy as a fairy godmother.

CHAPTER IV

It was nice and broad-minded of Chloe to be so interested in this friendship. After searching his mind for sinister motives, Gilbert could find none. Why, after all, should Chloe's motive be sinister? Moyra, he supposed, was good for him. She was titillating, and annoying, and moody, and doubtless unattainable. So much the better. He took her in frequent doses like a tonic wine, and came after some weeks to find her necessary. What was all this Freudian stuff about "spending one's libido"? Perhaps they were right, those people, despite their odious language.

And all the time Chloe watched him and smiled. And if he caught her smile he returned it, as a boy, conscious of having grown less naughty, smiles at his mother. "See what a good boy I'm becoming!" he seemed to say. "Almost normal again!" He was so determined that his nice medicine should do him good, for Chloe's sake. The rejuvenation of the tired heart!

A little money suddenly fluttered down into the flat. Actually a royalty cheque, twenty-two pounds seven shillings, and to Chloe a legacy from an aunt of four hundred pounds. Some hack jour-

nalism came along to Gilbert also, passed over genially by good-natured friends; and somebody described him in a paper as "an interesting literary figure." He felt flattered, and the seeds of intention, buried deep in him, began to sprout. Moyra deployed her charm still more outrageously —was it at the word of command?—and he almost ceased to hanker for his "drug," his day-dreams. His "case" took a back seat: he was definitely convalescent.

Chloe had been right, he felt, to give him his head a little. These stuffy English marriages—young couples imprisoned together in small flats, tied to one another, jarring one another, growing dead to one another—were all wrong. Unnecessary. He and Chloe were faithful friends and loyal partners; they ought to attack the problem of their future relations seriously, because they had been together long enough to know that their marriage had been based on something more than passion. The modern tendency, after all, was to put the flesh in its place; to face facts. There was too much of the "yoke" about conventional marriage, and yokes were for animals. Man and wife should preserve their personalities, have as much freedom in their relationship as two friends of the same sex. Not romantic, perhaps, but making for honesty and for permanence, for the preservation of children from the misery of a broken home. He was glad, for Chloe's sake, that she was making men-friends. George Maynard

Brown—the faithful George of his Oxford days—was always taking her to dances, now. But when he tried to face the possibility of physical "wild oats," on either side, he ran away from it. Chloe wasn't likely to be swept off her feet, and he felt that she was incapable of casual amours of the kind to which so many men are addicted. As for himself, he wasn't much good with women, didn't attract them, as a rule. The question wasn't likely to arise. Moyra? A few kisses, perhaps, but nothing more, thank heaven. The repressed Irish type. No warmth of heart in them; very free on the surface, very prudish underneath; the charm of the unattainable, certainly. *Amitié*, all the same sufficiently *amoureuse* to take him out of himself, to bring him to life again. Well, let it be. Things were improving. . . .

Nevertheless, though he did not perceive it, his meeting with Moyra had planted the seed of a "situation" now rapidly drawing towards its climax. How clearly, in later years, he was to remember the evening when the scales fell from his eyes. He had taken Moyra to the "Beggar's Opera"; they had enjoyed themselves immensely, and on the way home indulged in the luxury of a taxi. It was the first time that he had held her in his arms. She was pleased, flattered, unresisting—but without a trace of feeling. Her cheek was soft, smooth, delicious. And she gave him her lips. Why not? He was very happy, a shade sentimental; refreshed, delighted. When he

dropped her at her flat she waved to him, smiled and said, cryptically, "You'll find me a very disappointing person, Gilbert!"

He kept the taxi and drove home in a mild ecstasy. When he let himself into the flat he found Chloe and her "faithful George." George was a rather serious, hatchet-faced Treasury clerk, prematurely bald, and fulfilled with sound political convictions. Gilbert and he had been at Merton together, and had subsequently preserved a long and lukewarm friendship. Gilbert owed him twenty pounds, too. He was so cheerful that he could not help greeting Brown almost with effusion. "Such a jolly evening! Ranalow was in splendid voice. . . ." He noticed that they both seemed rather subdued.

"What have you two been doing?" he asked.

"Oh, we dined and danced," said Chloe quickly. "And then I brought George back here, as I remembered there was still some whisky."

"Good idea!" said Gilbert. "Have another one, George?"

George allowed his glass to be refilled, swallowed his drink and got up to go. For the voluble person that he usually was, Gilbert thought him unusually silent.

"Anything the matter with George?" he asked.

"Not that I know of," Chloe answered.

She turned away and went into her bedroom. Gilbert followed her soon afterwards. He felt pleasantly tired. It was good to be in bed.

Comfy. He felt confidential and talkative after the whiskey.

"Does George dance well?" he asked.

"Not particularly. He's really rather bad."

"Is he amusing? I never found the old stick very lively, I must say. Are you at all keen on him, darling?" he asked, lightly.

Chloe turned away her head and did not reply. He leant up in bed and looked at her, suddenly tortured with a doubt which hurt him to the marrow of his being. His mind did not work; he was merely conscious of excruciating pain. So it had come at last, what he had for so long subconsciously anticipated.

He laid a hand on Chloe's shoulder.

"Are you in love with him?" he managed to say, at last. His mouth was become dry, and his lips seemed glued together. He could not swallow. He did not know what had happened to all his "modern" ideas. Chloe buried her head in her pillow, nodded in answer to his question, and began to weep silently.

"How long have you . . . known it?"

"Only a little while, Gilbert. About a fortnight. I didn't mean to tell you . . . yet."

"Not until you had got me entangled with the unfortunate Moyra."

"I knew you'd like her. I thought. . . ."

Gilbert gazed at his wife in stupefaction. "But you don't mean . . ." he gasped. "You're not going to . . . It isn't serious?" His world had

collapsed, the ground had given way under his feet. He lay back on his pillow, exhausted. So this was what the prolonged struggle had ended in; defeat, utter and complete defeat. He was beaten. Chloe had seen it, and she had cut adrift in time.

"I suppose I couldn't have expected you to stick it out," he said. The primitive, possessive man in him was cheated of his anger. He could not be so dishonest with himself as not to see things from her side. And yet, there was Gillie, and there was the long friendship which had existed between them. Were their years of close intimacy, the tie of the flesh and the link of memories, to go for nothing? He had taken Chloe into his life, and through all their miseries when they were together there had been a sort of home. A bad thing? Perhaps, in some ways; but a home answered to a natural human need. It was worth sacrificing something to preserve. No wife is perfect after a few years, nor any husband. "For better or worse"—it isn't only the folly of mankind which the generations have preserved, but some of its small stock of wisdom, too. But he could not blame Chloe without blaming himself. Poverty was, perhaps, a worse vice than those it engendered. Perhaps it was the essential vice. One couldn't see it properly because of the sentimental trappings with which Christianity had for some reason invested it.

"And Gillie?"

"George has promised . . ." Chloe sobbed, "if you'll let him come . . . It's better than Miss Carmichael, Gilbert. We can bring him up and give him a chance."

"You have settled it all, I see."

"Gilbert!"

"Oh, my dear, it isn't any use prolonging the agony. If you want a divorce you shall have it. I'll 'desert' you to-morrow. I'll even pretend to hit you in front of the charwoman. I'll spend a night in the Euston Road. Divorce is more conventional, I suppose, even than marriage. And at the bottom of your heart you are conventional."

"You were my lover, Gilbert," Chloe sobbed, "and George is my husband . . . I couldn't help it . . . we neither of us could. . . . I didn't want to hurt you . . . we've always been such good friends, dear. Don't hate me, Gilbert. Try not to hate us. At least we haven't deceived you. I'm not an adulteress. George has only kissed me once, Gilbert. We couldn't help it, really we couldn't."

Chloe was now weeping uncontrollably. Gilbert took her shaking body in his arms and held her to him. In their common pain they were linked more closely than they had ever been by passion. The kiss of parting between two that have loved is more memorable, perhaps, than any other.

He left her to sleep, and went into the sitting-

room and lay down on the sofa, numbed and half-anæsthetised. Now at last he felt that he could say with the poet: "*Ne cherchez plus mon cœur; les bêtes l'ont mangé.*"

CHAPTER V

THERE was nothing to do in the Bloomsbury "bed-sitting-room" except to work, to read or to sleep. A coloured picture of a little girl in a sun-bonnet, with a big blue sash round her middle, and one of her arms round the neck of a large collie dog, hung over the bed. It was called "My Doggie," and Gilbert liked it very much, ever so much more than the photogravure of Royalty which surmounted the chimney-piece. Then there was a writing-table, a broken basket arm-chair, an iron bedstead with a dirty pink quilt over it, some strips of greasy carpet and a gas-fire with a shilling-in-the-slot meter whose appetite for coins became a bad joke. Its red metal stomach was simply insatiable! All the things in the room, however, were nice and friendly, even the gluttonous gas-fire. And in the Square outside there were a number of queer black shapes which, when spring came, would try hard to be trees. Perhaps, actually, they would succeed in uttering joyous leaves! Inspired by such heroism, who could be a coward?

Gilbert spent some weeks in the contemplation of his room. Its aspect made him feel a little hysterical, particularly when Miss Jones—the

landlady's sister, who "did" for him—added herself to its other beauties. Her head was held permanently sideways, so that a large, flat, corpse-coloured ear might be within easy access of anyone who wished to shout into it. Shouting, in point of fact, was quite useless. The only practicable means of communicating with her was to run downstairs to the first-floor landing, pick Miss Jones' ancient tin trumpet off the floor, and then apply it to the upturned "receiver." Inability to hear did not prevent Miss Jones from talking. "A fine day, isn't it, Mr. Vayle? Yes, I'll bring your tea up directly. Yes, *I'll* do it for you . . . no trouble at all." It added a certain spice to life to guess what it was she thought he wanted.

There were other compensations. Loneliness was one of them. The joy of the sported oak! Quite, quite alone. No one, positively, would come in. It was impossible for any callers to effect an entry. Miss Jones had invariably mislaid her trumpet when they knocked; and the violent oscillations of the bell, which rang in the kitchen, never succeeded in attracting her attention. He was so much alone that he could even amuse himself by trying to write verses. It was great fun. The morning hours would fly past while he grappled with the difficulties of rhyme and metre. And there were books which might be read—the old battered friends which had never been worth taking to the second-hand dealer.

The loneliness of the bed-sitting-room could be

extended, carried with him into the teeming streets. It gave an extraordinary sensation of freedom. He could go to the National Gallery, to the Tate Gallery, to the British Museum. Why not? There was nothing to prevent him: no "previous engagement." He was his own man now. If, when he came back to the wintry square, the tears sometimes poured down his cheeks, that, too, was his own business. He could sweat his agonies in decency, like the animals; could lick his own sores in private.

He was rather glad that Moyra, with what had seemed almost a sadistic instinct, had summarily dismissed him at his weakest moment. He had told her what a fool she was at considerable length and with the utmost affection, and—astounding as it had seemed—the girl had resented it! He had deliberately got himself the sack, as far as she was concerned. But if she had been a shade maternal, given him friendship . . .? It was just as well she hadn't. Rebounds are dangerous. In the end, one falls so much further. On the whole he was grateful to Moyra for her ingenious cruelties. They were tonic. Besides, what woman as vain as Moyra would want another woman's leavings? And then there was her affection for Chloe. It was all quite natural, and quite right. That chapter was over—his "emotional life." And what next? First of all, a job. A routine job for preference. Something that would get him into regular habits

of work by fairly easy stages. Something that would keep him alive. A job where you got an envelope on Friday evenings, which left you utterly and completely free from Saturday mid-day till Monday morning. A wholesome, disciplinary job, with no damned brains about it; a job requiring a little concentration, but no thought. He could not possibly admit a job into the world of his thought, his own secret world: his real world. *That* he was determined to keep to himself at all costs, even if he starved for it. It was in that world that he had seen the unforgettable, compassionate companion.

"When are you coming to me, Gilbert?" she had asked him.

When would he find her again?

The process of getting a job meant the surrender of his delicious solitude. These human contacts were like prisons, however agreeable. If you walked into them, you couldn't get out again without a struggle, in which everybody near you, yourself included, got hurt. He didn't in the least want to go back into one, however alluring. And they were damnably attractive—at first. But if he were a free man he was also a poor man, and poverty was the vice which he had set himself to overcome. No more hand-to-mouth existence, no more pawnshops, no more debts! Down in the mire though he might be, he was nevertheless re-made. Broken to pieces, he had built himself again. His energies, finding no means of dissi-

pation, flowed back into himself. The responsibilities which had so cruelly given him up had taken with them a weight of years and a burden of weariness. And with eyes no longer tired, with eyes directed now by an undistracted brain, the beauty of the visible world flowed in upon him and thrilled him with thankfulness.

His return—detached, and scarred by experience, like one who after a prolonged and perilous journey revisits his birthplace, uncertain of a welcome—was brought about by a casual encounter in the Charing Cross Road. He had been poring over the volumes outside his favorite bookshop when suddenly he noticed two surprising figures striding towards him, one of whom he recognized as an old friend called Tobey Walker. Neither wore a hat. Their clothes were rough and tweedy. They had misshapen rucksacks on their shoulders. The girl's bobbed brown hair was about the same length as the man's honey-coloured locks, and equally tousled.

"Hullo, Gilbert!" cried Tobey, waving an enormous ash-plant. "What fun! . . . How are you? . . . Do you know each other? . . . This is Prudence . . . We've just been discussing whether we've done with each other yet. Personally, I give it another week, but Prudence seems doubtful. . . . Come along with us. Are you doing anything? Obviously not. . . . We're going to have tea with Mrs. Leigh-Perins, to have dinner with Mrs. Leigh-Perins, to live with Mrs.

Leigh-Perins. You had better come and live there too. . . ."

In the tube they exchanged their news since they last met, two years ago. Tobey, it seemed, had become "liberated." He was a free spirit now, and his mission in life was to free others from their repressions. (Prudence's repressions had, it appeared, just vanished during a walking-tour on the Yorkshire moors.) People ought to love one another as freely as the birds sing. The Victorian "possessive instinct" was the enemy, and the "broken heart," and the life-long love, and all the rest of that nonsense—paying women's tube fares for example. ("Prudence, where's your fourpence?") He never paid things for women. Bad for them. Insulting. Old-fashioned British gentleman idea . . . "The *ladies*, God bless 'em!" When he gave up being married (in Surbiton, too) it was like coming out of prison. They had a barometer in the hall; engravings of cows and Highland lakes in the dining-room; a sideboard; a maid with a lace cap, and a cook in the kitchen; little smug dinner-parties to their frightful friends. He stood it for two years. Gwen? Oh, she was still living with the engravings of cows. If Gilbert would like to go and call on her, to see what he could do, he'd pay the fare. Sent dozens of friends down. No use. Very fine woman, Gwen; long legs, cool flanks, small breasts, but repressed type. Frozen with generations of repression. "Wants a divorce, too. . . . Badgers

me to go and call on solicitors. Hate solicitors. . . ."

The conversation was become a monologue: no one but Tobey could out-roar the Hampstead Tube railway. Gilbert was perfectly happy. He felt ready to live for an indefinite period with Mrs. Leigh-Perins and Prudence and Tobey.

On emerging from the tube they made in the direction of Fitz-John's Avenue, Tobey striding ahead. They reached at last a vast and abominable red-brick villa, with what looked like a large billiard-room attached to it. Its name was "Belsize Towers." There was a separate pathway leading to the billiard-room, which had its own door. Tobey gave a warning bang, opened it and marched in. Gilbert followed, dazed. The room was huge, with a high timbered roof, like a baronial banqueting-hall. Round a grand piano at one end of it stood three pretty girls, clad only in the thinnest of gauze draperies. They were, it seemed, "doing" eurythmics. Various other details in the room impressed themselves slowly upon Gilbert. One wall was devoted to abstract art; on another hung some dejected-looking post-impressionists. It was all, somehow, hot and hurried and momentary. There was a fresco of obscene beasts, ramping through a conventional jungle. There was a slab of Reckitt's Blue in a plain wood frame, *d'après Matisse;* there was sculpture—tortured human bodies, girls with gigantic haunches, "significant forms." And wandering about in the

wide bare spaces, like persons walking up and down in a field, were young men and young women, bobbed-haired, loose-lipped, and curiously pathetic. On the huge divans surrounding the room were more of them. And in the midst, towering upwards, stood the most remarkable creature Gilbert had ever seen. She was clad in a shapeless garment of purple silk and her large fat face was surmounted by a Russian head-dress sewn with gigantic imitation pearls, from the back of which depended a veil of green silk. A very long amber cigarette-holder protruded from her lips. Her brown eyes had deep laughter-wrinkles round them, her fat throat wobbled strangely.

But before he had time properly to observe her, Tobey was introducing him. Mrs. Leigh-Perins held his hand firmly, smiled at him, then turned to Tobey for his biography. "Old friend . . . author . . . never read his books, though . . . Bolshevist . . . used to be—not now . . . old-fashioned repressions . . . wants liberating . . . must take him in hand."

"That's fine," said the tall woman, beaming at Gilbert. "You've come to the right place here. We're all free. I'm free, too, now. Never was when Perins was alive, bless him! I'd a hell of a life with Perins. But thank God, he's with his Maker, and he had the decency to leave me wads before he turned his toes up. So don't you mind me being vulgar, because I'm good-'earted. You

ask any of the girls and boys. . . . Oh, I do like to see 'em all so happy.

Tobey came up and snatched Gilbert away while Mrs. Leigh-Perins—or "Cleopatra," as everyone called her—was in the midst of her torrential greeting, and introduced him to the three earnest and unclothed Dalcrozians. They carried him off to one of the divans and grouped themselves round him—a red head, a fair head, a dark head. They asked him questions and roared with laughter at his replies. They thought him the funniest new exhibit. Their names were Marjorie, Iseult and Kathleen. They had been co-educated at Conway. (Not Welsh, though. Manchester. Altrincham? Guessed it!) What were they doing here? Learning rhythmic movement and the rhythm of life from Madeleine Michoud, and Child-Welfare and Economics at London University. They attended lectures! Gilbert began to feel very old. Also, not quite so old as he expected. It was a change after deaf Miss Jones and the bed-sitting-room. What a pity his life with Chloe had not lasted out a few months longer. Perhaps this absurd Cleopatra might have done something for them. But Chloe wasn't repressed, she was much more difficult to cure. She was conventional. And her humour was intolerant. What a lonely woman she was, at heart—always rejecting the small change of human intercourse. Always hating where she did not love. Right, perhaps, from her point of view. But she missed the fun of

looking on. The new generation. What the dickens did they want? What were they going to build in the place of everything they were destroying? Did they know? Did anybody know? What *could* they know of freedom who did not know the value of discipline and of its chains? "Made Free in Prison"—some Conchy wrote a book called that. Lot in the title. Gilbert wondered how the theme was worked out. At this point he had to remove a long, supple, shapely leg which Iseult (the red-headed one) was twining round him with the expertise of an acrobat.

In the spate of new acquaintances directed towards him by Tobey, a gaunt man with a beaked nose, a face like a starved crow and curled, disgusted smile, stood out. Ha-ha. Dead heart. Dead heart. War casualty, perhaps? Got into himself and couldn't get out again. Walled in! Was that what he, Gilbert Vayle, was coming to, also? Not that! Rather cry, privately, when he was hurt. Not dignified, not the strong, silent Englishman touch, but keeps you alive, anyway. Writers and the musical bunch—all emotional. Lot of the woman in them. That's why their brains breed. Gilbert sat near the dead-looking man at dinner. He turned out to be Austin Dodge, "the chap who made all that money with that play, whatever its name was." A tremendous celebrity at the time—social light, too. Never done anything since. "Dried up, like me," thought Vayle. "I should like to be matey; but he would

stamp on my advances. Well, the 'never was' has certain advantages over the 'has been'! At least, we can't cling despairingly to an importance which we never possessed." All the same, they talked a little in the calm moments between Cleopatra's tempests of speech.

The dinner was plain, but very well cooked. There was a great deal to drink. Cleopatra insisted that a bottle of champagne should be opened for Gilbert—to assist, no doubt, in the process of liberation. The Dalcrozians, restored now to bobbed propriety, and dressed in silk jumpers of various shades, got up from their seats and clustered round him to have their glasses filled. It was all like a vast family party of polite lunatics. "Cleopatra, Empress of Dottyville." One of the naughty children had already coined the phrase.

After dinner, there was dancing—chiefly to the music of a gramophone—in the big studio. People wandered in and out. They all appeared to know one another, but it was difficult to gather who was in love with whom, except from their quarrels. Gilbert was not sure that he quite approved of all these young things on the look-out for somebody to lead them up the garden. They were all intelligent and highly educated. There didn't seem to be one among them who hadn't read the works of Messrs. Freud and Jung and Coué and Baudouin. Iseult of the red hair—*enfant terrible!*—said to him, in the middle of a fox-trot, that Krafft-Ebbing

had taught her a good deal and that she found him ever so much more interesting than Freud. Whew! That was getting rid of repressions with a vengeance. He remembered the much-thumbed copy he had borrowed in adolescence; the furtive reading behind a locked door. At least the younger generation had cleaned up that cupboard a bit, though its contents—brought into the open —still needed a disinfectant.

For his dance with Cleopatra only the champagne could have nerved him. Perhaps, wise old thing, she foresaw this when she insisted on opening the bottle. Gilbert clutched wildly at her stayless back, and his fingers dug into the soft, warm, silk-covered flesh in the effort to get a grip of her. A mistake in steering (and her waving head-dress made an impenetrable screen) would lead to a disaster. He pictured himself subsiding, with Cleopatra in his arms, onto the parquet. However, there was no collision, and when the record came to an end he steered her proudly into port.

The springs of the divan groaned under her weight, and Gilbert felt himself growing hysterical. The contrast was too sharp between the scene before him and the life with Chloe in the Earl's Court flat, from which he had emerged. Fancy Mr. and Mrs. Maynard Brown in this *galère!* He thought of his vanished neurasthenia, of which the *affaire* with Moyra Burden seemed now to have been the last and deadliest symptom. Well, thank the Lord, that was all over. His "case" couldn't

exist in this atmosphere, anyway. But those dreams that he used to have, they were different. Those dreams! We are all lonely, even when we live in a crowd. All lonely.

"Do let the children make you a bed on one of the divans. They're very comfortable. We can't let you go now, my dear. You're one of us. You don't want to go right back home to-night?"

But he *did* want to go right back home. Miss Jones's sheltering wing waited for him in Bloomsbury. He suddenly felt that he must escape immediately, at all costs. His departure was hasty as Joseph's, and like Joseph he left behind him an article of clothing. Fateful silken scarf!

CHAPTER VI

GILBERT was not long in discovering that the worst matrimonial crime which it is possible to commit is to be the odd man out.

The Maynard Browns had been superb. From every quarter of the town, in answer to George's cry "A Maynard! A Brown!" had assembled beefy bourgeois in defence of the endangered member of their clan. They were a great family, typical of London. For thirty years the Maynard Browns' salmon-and-shrimp paste had been on every British breakfast-table. Twenty years ago, as a thank-offering to Almighty God for his prosperity, the Ebenezer Chapel at Highbury had been erected by the founder of the family. So strong in them was that grand old nonconformist tradition, which has been the inspiration of so much of our commercial greatness, that even the younger generation of Maynard Browns were unable entirely to escape the influence of the Brown conventicle. George's father, though less devout than his grandfather, worshipped there assiduously upon each sabbath. George's brothers (South Kensington, Ealing, Wimbledon, and Bayswater) had all been married within the sacred precincts. The Maynard Browns stood like one man no less

for the sanctity of the marriage tie, and for the purity of the home, than for the old-fashioned British breakfast (with salmon-and-shrimp paste). George's generation, education at Eton or Winchester, and at Oxford or Cambridge, had added to the family faith the public school code, the honour of the British gentleman, and that chivalry which was exemplified so admirably in the person of Albert, Prince Consort. It was obvious, in the circumstances, imbued with these principles, that the Browns could do no wrong. An essential nobility clung in their own eyes to their every action. George, in the eyes of his brothers, had been, perhaps, unwise—betrayed into a generous indiscretion by his excessive chivalry. He had gone to the rescue of the young matron in distress, chained to a monster. She had appealed to him—to his warm and generous heart—in her misery. Was not her husband imperfectly solvent? Was he not one of these artist types, who are immoral to a man? However much George might seem in some people's eyes, to have fallen below the Highbury level, Gilbert Vayle was clearly the villain of the piece. And, after all, divorce in these days was very respectable. Had not the peerage set the fashion?

With George's parents the situation was more complicated. Mr. Samuel Maynard Brown had preached, had spoken upon platforms (particularly before the flotation of some new company in which his interests were involved) upon the text,

"Whom God hath joined." Thanks to the sternness of his morality, he was the chosen guardian of the investments of thousands of his fellow-Baptists. At the very moment of George's access of chivalry the last and most essential of his companies was on the point of going to subscription. "The Lord has seen fit to chasten me," he groaned. In other words, it was damned annoying; and summoning George to his office, he passed on to his offspring as large a measure of the Almighty's chastisement as he was able to unload. But blood tells, does it not? It is also thicker than water. George did not distress himself unduly.

Gilbert, to his surprise, found himself summoned to call upon the benefactor of the British breakfast-table a few days after his visit to Mrs. Leigh-Perins. With some reluctance he took himself into the city and was ushered into the august presence.

"Sit down," roared Mr. Samuel Maynard Brown, smarting still under his Maker's displeasure. He towered over his visitor, placed a large flat hand upon one buttock and gnawed his grey moustache. He wore long striped trousers ("Grandpapa's Sunday trousers") and a vaguely ecclesiastical black coat and waistcoat. "Most unpleasant affair this," he went on, glaring at Gilbert. "Most unpleasant affair! But you needn't think I'm going to put all the blame on George. I've heard from several sources what kind of a man you are! And I know my own son!

George was always a good boy"—a little pathos now tempered his pugnacity—"a good son devoted to his mother, kind to everybody. Of course, he has acted very wrongly. He cannot expect God's blessing on his new life. All the same, his motives were chivalrous—always chivalrous. He couldn't help himself, I suppose, with you flaunting your immoralities before your unfortunate wife! No wonder she turned to George. Besides, I understand you write books advocating immorality . . . positively *advocating* it, sir! I can only congratulate your wife on her escape. There will have to be a divorce, of course. . . . There's no getting away from it, the license of your type of man is a menace to the community. . . . The least you can do now is to try your best to make amends."

Gilbert grew apoplectic with rage, partly at being bullied by the really distressed and rather pathetic figure in front of him, partly with himself for having no repartee handy. He knew quite well how many admirable retorts he would think of the moment he was out of the room. Golly, what a family! Whatever would poor Chloe do when she was imprisoned among them, one of the clan? Take to drink, perhaps or elope with a chauffeur.

Mr. Maynard Brown had not yet finished. He enlarged upon the superiority of his generation over all other generations, past or future. Then George and all his brothers had, it appeared, been

immaculately engendered. No trace of fleshly appetite had ever rose-tinted the relations of Samuel with Mrs. Samuel. In the long, sweet years of their courtship, their kisses had been few and pure, though, "Of course, we hoped for children."

Had Gilbert not been so angry he might have been touched by the spectacle of this proud and strong-willed old man, who honestly did his best to live up to his principles, and was trying to reconcile his beliefs with the action of his son, to whom he was genuinely devoted.

But Gilbert had suffered too, and felt himself entitled to consideration rather than insult. He hadn't entered that offensive office in order to listen to a recital of the virtues of the Maynard Browns. But he was too angry to be effective, and he departed from the building trembling and inarticulate, leaving Mr. Maynard Brown with all the honours of the field. It took him about half an hour, walking aimlessly through the clinging, choking fog, to recover his equilibrium and his sense of humour. There was something overpowering about this family's technique of being always right.

Chloe's aged parents—Mr. and Mrs. Wilson-Hepburn of The Laurels, Woking—were scarcely less impressive, in their eagerness to stamp upon the odd man out, than were the Maynard Browns; but they acted with more *savoir faire*. Mr. Wilson-Hepburn received his son-in-law in his study at

Woking, made him a strong whisky-and-soda, and proceeded to behave precisely as a gentleman of ancient lineage, indisputably armigerous, ought to behave. It was a fine exhibition of aristocratic suavity, as carefully studied as the grey Henri Quarte beard which, at moments during the interview, he meditatively stroked. Gilbert perceived that Chloe had managed her parents to perfection. George (thanks to that salmon-and-shrimp paste, to his cushy job in Whitehall and his Etonian varnish) had been accepted by the family within forty-eight hours. Mrs. Wilson-Hepburn, a lady of much practical common-sense, made no secret of her elation. After all, Chloe had behaved honourably. She had not been "unfaithful" to Gilbert, and Gilbert had deserted her deliberately. Everything showed that Gilbert had ceased to care, and wanted his freedom. Mrs. Wilson-Hepburn's manner to George Maynard Brown had—from the first—been affability itself. To Gilbert, on the occasion of his visit, she extended two fingers and an acid smile. The general situation, the Wilson-Hepburn attitude, was not lost upon Gilbert despite his father-in-law's charm of manner and distinguished hospitality. It was plain that all these people really understood divorce. It was somehow, part of their system; an integral part of the whole Victorian marriage system (on which, of course, the trade of prostitution has flourished for so long). It was a highly conventional affair to them; fashionable, with rigid rules.

Chloe walked with her husband to Woking Station. She was silent and morose, suffering from violent nerve-strain. The divorce imbroglio seemed to have brought out all her native melancholy. She was intensely sorry for herself, tragic with self-pity. Only her fine fundamental selfishness, a quality which Gilbert envied her, seemed to lend her strength. They kissed good-bye on the platform of the station with a curious outburst of emotion for which neither could entirely account.

This, then, was the end of it all! Every cord snapped, every link broken, every tie of relationship vanished. Nothing left between them but a child of three, and a host of memories which time would quickly blur. It was all so stupid and so squalid. The French system—any system that worked—was surely preferable. As Gilbert sat in the crowded third-class carriage of the train which bore him on to Waterloo, he wondered whether any solution of the problem of human relationships was likely to be found by Tobey Walker and his bobbed-haired fellow-enthusiasts. Poor little wretches—pathetic pioneers—testing their theories, so young, by the bitter test of experience. What would they make of it? Nobody knew.

CHAPTER VII

GILBERT might never have revisited Mrs. Leigh-Perins strange house had he not left his only silk scarf in her keeping. But there it was, and he could not afford to buy another. On the occasion of his second visit he was received like a wandering sheep who must, at all costs, be taught to love the fold. Cleopatra felt inspired to "work amongst" him; Prudence and Tobey conducted a special mission; Iseult of the red hair made him a bed on the divan.

"And of course, me dear, we'll find you a job!" said Mrs. Leigh-Perins. "We do have so many activities! There's the Freedom for Ireland Society, and the Jugo-Slavian Babies, and the reformed Diet Information Bureau, and the Sanity and Sex Group, and the Mother's Magna Charta, the Divorce Law Reformers, and the University Communists—and I don't know what all. I *know* there's something going in the Jugo-Slavian Babies: and of course there's always a vacancy in the Reformed Diet. But there, you eat and drink so healthy you wouldn't like that would you? But you must have a room here, whatever happens. You'll be more comfy than in that Bloomsbury, and cheaper. I make all the boys and girls pay

a pound a week. It's easier for all of us. Then I feel it's you that's doing *me* the favour. . . . Oh, I do wish I could make everyone happy, but I don't know as it's reelly right the way I'm going about it. Sometimes I'm that worried over it all. But I don't know. Nothing could be worse than a marriage with no love in it. They start all right —and then look at it! That American woman knew what she was about who came over here last year and said everybody ought to have jobs. That's the secret! Jobs and latchkeys. Nobbut what Dr. Marie Stopes has done her bit too, though somehow the poitry doesn't seem to mix. Science or slush. You can't have it both ways in the one book, can you now? I dunno. If only all the young things could be happier than I was. Not that I want to run down Perins, you understand. Especially him having done the decent in the end and left me all this rhino. Though I grant you he hadn't anyone else to leave it to, him quarrelling all the time with all his family. Still, you know what I mean."

Cleopatra took longer to run down into silence than any of her gramophone records; but Gilbert felt no impatience. He could have listened for hours to her inexhaustible flow. It was evident that she had a heart as large as the rest of her anatomy, and her humility was disarming. Once, after he had been installed in the house for a week or two, Gilbert found her weeping over one of Tobey's socks, because she hadn't been able to

understand his tall-talk about psycho-analysis and felt she was too old to "learn it all up." He gave her a filial hug and told her that he certainly didn't understand all that bunkum himself, and that Tobey didn't either; and what did it matter, anyway? Poor Cleopatra! No mother ever strove more selflessly or more humbly to be good to her children.

When the promised job materialized it turned out to be partly the Jugo-Slavian Babies and partly the Freedom for Ireland Society. The two organisations shared office-accommodation in Smith House, Westminster, and had an interchangeable committee, presided over by the indefatigable Lord Corfe. Gilbert's task was to get printed and distributed the abundant "free literature" issued by the two societies, to attend the committee meetings and write the minutes, and to interview callers. The callers were mostly the rather strident young women who, from an office on the floor above, directed the operations of the Reformed Diet Information Bureau (the "R.D.I.B.") and the Sanity and Sex Group (the "S.S.G."). There was also the secretary of an important annexe to the S.S.G., known to the lift-boy as "them venereals." She was a highly starched lady named Miss Lucilla Lampeter, late of Newham. She wore horn-rimmed spectacles, had written a novel, and had an inordinate appetite for statistics about the Jugo-Slavian Babies. Gilbert became terrified when, upon their third meeting, she touched lightly

upon literature. He knew it was coming, and it came. One day, with a slight and not unbecoming flush, Miss Lampeter deposited a copy of her "little book" upon his desk.

One of the bobbed-haired "Sanity and Sex" girls saw her doing it, too; and pounced upon the volume as soon as Miss Lampeter had left the room. Her name was Dorothy Dawson. She was a red-faced ex-land-girl whose sexual sanity caused Gilbert as much uneasiness as Miss Lampeter's spinster-like coyness. He felt frail as a lily in her presence.

"Whew! she calls it a 'little book,' does she? Silly swank! Five hundred pages of Newham tosh. Makes you want a double Scotch and soda, the very sight of the damn thing. Give us a gasper, Gilbert, there's a good fellow." Miss Dawson banged together the covers of "The Soul on the Hill-Top," and dropped it into the waste-paper basket.

What was one to do about her? Could one take a young thing, daughter of an archdeacon, employed by a committee of earnest good-workers presided over by a High Church peer, into a bar and give her a drink? Or did she want to go for a week-end walking-tour and have "free relations"? Gilbert sweated at the prospect. In the old days, before the country was burdened with two million surplus but emancipated females, the god pursued and the maiden hid. It was more fun that way, because there was more "sin." Now sin, in the

old sense of the word, had disappeared. It had all been exposed and spring-cleaned by these vigorous young reformers with their courage, and their honesty, and their splendid hopefulness.

"It is all very well," said Gilbert, "but you had better take care that you don't sweep away with it its counterpart—virtue."

"That's utter rot," Dorothy retorted, sitting down on a pile of free literature describing the sorrows of the Jugo-Slavian Babies, and lighting a cigarette. "You're an old fogey, Gilbert. A nasty old back-number. You ought to face sex frankly and put it in its proper place."

"But what is its proper place? *I* don't know. Do you? Now, don't go and recite all your sanity and sex pamphlets. I've read them all, and they tell me nothing. You see, I've had some years of practical experience."

"Oh, I know, poor old thing, you've been through it . . . and got hurt. Surely you *must* see there's a better way than all that marriage and divorce nonsense? Sex ought to come quite naturally; a spontaneous expression of people's feelings for one another. It ought to come as naturally as a kiss. And when a baby happens, the mother ought to be endowed until she is able to work again; and the baby ought to be brought up in the State nursery until the mother is able to look after it. . . ."

"M'y yes," said Gilbert, doubtfully. "It *sounds* all right. When there's a State nursery,

and when both sexes are thoroughly emancipated from their own possessive instincts, your ideals may be realized. But it will be easier to build State nurseries than to alter human nature. All you children try to pretend that you have the same sexual natures as your men. You haven't; you never will have; and unless you are fools you won't want to have. Man is a polygamous brute, but that doesn't incapacitate him from being, at the same time, faithful and devoted. If the average decent woman tries to imitate his roving and adventurous promiscuity, she is done for. Only women of quite exceptional character and temperament can make a success of that kind of thing. . . . Your talk about love coming as naturally as a kiss is nonsense, my dear, as you may very soon discover . . ."

"That's right," Dorothy broke in. "Now we've got it! You want one law for the woman and another for the man."

"I do," said Gilbert. "Just as I agree there should be one law for the rich and another for the poor! I'm ten years in advance of you progressives, because in regard to first principles I've got back to my grandmother already; and it will take you at least another decade to complete the circle."

"Beast!" said Dorothy. "I hate you."

"Come here and give me a kiss, then," Gilbert replied. "It will be quite natural; and it won't hurt a bit."

Dorothy jumped up from her pamphlets, seized Gilbert round the waist with her strong young arms and gave him a resounding kiss upon the lips. She laid her bobbed head for a moment on his shoulder, then kissed him again on the neck, just below his left ear. "It's time I went and did some work," she remarked, after a pause. Then she ran quickly from the room without another word.

Gilbert dropped limply into Lord Corfe's armchair and gazed in bewilderment at the shut door. Then he laughed aloud; and then was silent. . . .

It was time to close the office. He went out to the nearest public-house and bought himself a lonely and meditative drink. Dorothy's kiss had been an invitation. Was there any point in clinging to principles which she herself had discarded, and giving her a priggish and ungallant refusal? Perhaps, after all, the girl was right. Perhaps . . . He felt bewildered, in a world without commandments.

CHAPTER VIII

"I SUPPOSE I shall have to go forth into the streets, Tobey," Gilbert remarked some weeks later, "and search for a bad woman."

Tobey stared at his friend. "Whatever for?" he asked, in genuine amazement. "You don't mean to say you are going to hire a prostitute as 'evidence'?"

"Why not? It's their job. Why ever shouldn't they do a little legitimate business once in a while, and receive a proper fee for their trouble? I shall find a nice fat one, who plays double-dummy bridge. Then with a bottle of whisky between us we shall get through the night quite comfortably."

"But why don't you take Iseult away for the week-end? She's obviously keen on you. Or Prudence? Prudence would love it. She and I wound things up about a fortnight ago. She's such a dear. You'd like her. And she'd darn all your socks and mend all your clothes for you. As you are the guilty party and won't defend, there's no need for any publicity. I couldn't spend a night alone in a room with one of those women, even under the most platonic conditions. . . ."

"You mean you are so damned stingy, Tobey, that you wouldn't spring a fiver for her professional services. My God, what a damned, dirty, squalid atmosphere it is. The Divorce Court, and everything to do with it, stinks like a *cloaque*. I'm almost converted to all your silly views on marriage. Perhaps I would be quite: if I didn't live in this house."

Gilbert made himself a drink and lay back against the pile of mauve cushions on his black divan. Tobey, stroking his honey-coloured hair, watched derisively from the arm-chair.

"What's the matter with the house?"

"It swarms so. Not masculine enough for me. I'm not sure that the new promiscuity isn't a thousand times worse than the old stuffy and badly ventilated Victorian marriage. I don't believe in women lowering their price, or in men lowering their standards. In fact, Tobey, I'm not a womaniser like you; and I hate living in a crowd."

"You haven't any real communal feeling," said Tobey. "That's what is the matter with you. You've got a smug bourgeois basis, with great streaks and layers of nonconformist humbug in your mental make-up. You don't understand the joy of life."

"Damn it, how much longer do you think you are going to keep up this 'joy of life' stunt, running about with young things half your age! Do you realise that we're both of us nearly forty?

Hang it all. The age of consent, for people like you, Tobey, ought to be fixed at your own age, thirty-five. Your only chance is to be married by a musical virago, with an eye to your expectations. She'd keep you in order, shoo away the bobbed-haired children, and make you work. You'd love it."

Tobey shuddered. "Gwen answered that description all too accurately. You've forgotten the barometer, and the dining-room sideboard, and the awful dinner-parties. No. You've got a slave mind, my dear, and no one can save you, though we've done our best. Why, you are a comparatively sensible human being now. When Prudence and I found you in the Charing Cross Road, you were a morbid, neurasthenic wreck, a decayed mass of complexes and neuroses. Both Prudence and I diagnosed you at once as suffering from tertiary matrimony. You ought to be very grateful."

"I *am* grateful, Tobey," said Gilbert. "I disapprove of you thoroughly, but I love you all the same. And now, for the love of heaven, let's go out somewhere and get tight. Come on. The Café? Haven't been there for years."

But it was not so easy to steer the inflammable Tobey into the street. Iseult, encountered in the hall, had on a new jumper. Marjorie was cheeky and ran away on sandalled feet, asking for pursuit. Prudence, with dog-like eyes (so full of

suffering that they might have wrung the heart of a Landru), emerged from her room with a pair of mended socks, and had to be cheered up. However, at last Tobey allowed himself to be dragged to the front door; and they proceeded by way of the Hampstead Tube to Piccadilly Circus.

The fog of tobacco smoke which hung over the drinkers in the Café seemed thicker than ever as Gilbert and Tobey Walker stood blinking at them in the doorway. As usual, the place was crowded, and they had difficulty in finding seats. Gilbert ordered himself and Tobey a double whisky in order to blur the surroundings as quickly as possible. No sane person could bear the Café for five minutes unless he had taken drink or was doped. The whisky warmed and mellowed them, and they began to examine the room for familiar faces. On the bench opposite them sat huddled an apparently decayed mass of human remains. There were five or six bodies, two dented, perilously poised bowlers, a "trilby," some dank black hair. On the marble table, in front of the bodies, were three half-finished glasses of stout, an overturned bottle of Schweppe's soda water, two empty whisky glasses. After a few minutes a small eye opened on the extreme right. Then a faint shiver ran through the half-dozen once-human organisms. Then a husky voice came from the extreme left. "Hullo, Gilbert old man. Got the price of a drink on you?"

Gilbert looked at Mario, the waiter. Mario,

bland and all-knowing, shook his head emphatically. Gilbert shook his head too, and smiled. "Sorry, old man." There was a pause. Suddenly the decayed bodies became galvanised into action. Life returned to them. The mass separated into its component parts. The dead faces opened furious, fish-like, filmy eyes. Lips yellow with nicotine, parted, and from slimy mouths void of saliva, words issued huskily, at torrential speed.

"You're a bloody swine, Gilbert; that's what you are. You know you've got it on you, blast you. Be a sport, damn it!"

Gilbert fell. After all, he *had* the price on him, though God knew how he was to make it up in the morning. Mario, wise ineffably, brought small lagers. Artificial saliva was provided. Part of the mass fumbled with a notebook, tore a sheet from it, scrawled a few words, twisted it, and gave it to the waiter. "What's the good of having a bloody wife?" he hiccoughed. The waiter took the slip of paper, grinned philosophically at Gilbert and walked over to a pretty girl (not in her first youth) sitting next to a young man in evening clothes who had the gummy heroin eye. He handed her the twisted paper. The girl read it, waved her hand, laughed, blew a kiss. The waiter returned with a ten shilling Treasury-note. "Blast her!" said the husband. "A green one!" To the confusion of Gilbert and Tobey, potent drinks were now irresistibly ordered.

"What are they all?" Tobey gasped.

"Painters and poets," said Gilbert. "Don't you know? This is it. These are they!" He was intoxicated with squalor. The rich fumes of depravity unnerved him. Down in the pit. Wallowing. The gutter. Would the stars shine out with unendurable brightness? Yes. A double gin and tonic!

This was a new side to Gilbert. Tobey glanced at him suspiciously, then looked round for some way of escape. By Jove, yes. Over there was Betty Carson and another girl, with those two men from King's College. Repressed types all of them. The girls caught his eye and smiled at him. Tobey at once felt a sense of mission. "I must go over and talk to Betty Carson," he said. After all, this was Gilbert's night out. Tobey decamped, eye inflamed, *torvo oculo*. . . .

One of the mass leant forward across the table to Gilbert. "It's all right, old boy," he whispered. "Here's Webster Levy . . . Hullo, Webster. Room here . . . yes." (Sotto voce) "Tons of money. Painting his portrait. Sit where you are, Gilbert. Awful head to draw. Only paying me twenty. Got a wife worse than himself. My God, I hate this Café! I only care for my art, old boy. That's all I really live for. Thank goodness, I remembered to steal a dozen tubes of paint from John's studio the last time I was there. Couldn't have started this job otherwise."

Webster beamed, unseeing. This was Bohemia, was not it? His friends were a bit odd, but how

proud he was to be called Webster by *known people!* Drinks? Bless their hearts. Of course. Double gins and tonics.

"Mr. Vayle—Mr. Webster Levy."

"Pleased to meet you, sir. Mr. Gilbert Vayle?" ("Sensation in Court," muttered Gilbert, beaming.)

Gilbert extended a trembling hand, fervent with alcoholic stimulation.

The once inanimate mass of decayed humanity was now all liveliness and chatter. Mario beamed. Mr. Levy beamed. The happy husband beamed. The gins had done their work.

The portrait-painter waxed lyrical. Art was his theme. The wonderful life of the artist! He was a priest, a king. He came to the Café to drown the horror and the ugliness of life. The artist was the seer. . . . "I will, Webster. Same again. . . ."

"Yours, Mr. Vayle?"

"Thanks, yes," said Gilbert.

Gins and tonics all round.

What was Orpen anyway? Damned bad commercial artist. John was all right, once. Spoiled by prosperity. All these fellows the same. . . .

Gilbert sweated and looked across the room at Tobey, who watched him anxiously. "Sorry, Tobey," he thought, "but I *did* come out to get tight, didn't I?"

He was not quite pickled yet, though.

A row happened between some drunken

bookies. The men, fat and panting, leapt at each other's throats. Fur-clad ladies, with impressive *balcons*, became tearful. Glasses broke, veins stood out, chairs fell over, waiters dashed up, the chucker-out functioned. The group stirred not a hair.

"Art—that's all life is," the portrait-painter continued, unmoved, fixing his half-empty glass with black emotional eye.

Mr. Levy (not in the art business: in wholesale onion importing) wondered what he could do to show his gratitude. More drinks?

Closing time. Lowered lights. Tobey flashing by with the nice girls, and the university students following, speechless. Lucky Tobey! Relapse of the group into a huddle of inanimate forms. Gilbert felt released. Ginny. Lovely feeling. Night yet young. The chucker-out menaced. "*Long* past time, gentlemen."

Mr. Levy's *naïveté* remained undinged. He sipped his light lager. What *could* he do? Weren't they nice to him? Real painters! Well-known men! Gilbert's heart would have bled for Mr. Levy, but his gins and tonics had staunched the flow. Instead, he watched. "I say, you chaps," said Mr. Levy at last. (Could he call them "chaps"?) "I know a place . . . Taxis . . . all of us . . . not far."

The mass recovered its animation. The salivaless mouths uttered words. "Good old Webster. One of the best."

Through the middle door they trooped, and out of the middle door. Through the swing-doors they banged and out of them, Mr. Levy still ecstatic. The commissionaire whistled for the taxis. The taxis came. They filled up, but Gilbert dodged them. The party drove off, conscious of his absence, fiercely resenting it. "Be a sport," shouted Levy's protégé. "Come on, Gilbert," yelled the pretty lady's husband, putting his head through the open window of his cab. But Gilbert wouldn't come on. He couldn't, though he was ashamed of himself for not doing so. He was restrained by an overmastering determination. "Got to find bad woman," he murmured to himself, turning up Regent Street towards Oxford Circus. "Got to find bad woman."

CHAPTER IX

THE drink went off him in the cold raw air. Gilbert's mind became unnaturally clear, and his body, save for his legs, which were a trifle out of control, gave no trouble. He walked quickly up Regent Street, his hands stuffed into the pockets of his raincoat, his stick dangling from one arm. At one moment he felt absurdly elated, hilarious, ginny: at another he sank into a trough of depression. When he reached the top of the street, with the intention of making for the Tottenham Court Road he swung sharply round the corner to the right and collided with a lady walking in the opposite direction. He apologised energetically. The lady was plump, her hat spectacular, and her profession marked all over her in plain figures. But she evidently had an accommodating temper.

"That's oright, dearie," she gasped; "you didn't 'urt me. I 'ave difficulty with me bref," she went on. "Walking too fast I was. Cold, ain't it?"

Gilbert felt surreptitiously in his pockets, and discovered that he still had a couple of Treasury notes and quite a lot of silver. Then he resumed the conversation. "Wish we could get a drink somewhere, don't you?" he remarked.

"Well, that's just what I was thinking meself

when we ran into each other. I've got a bottle of porty wine at my place. Feel you could fancy a drop? It's good stuff, it reely is. Not public-'ouse port."

"Come on," said Gilbert, elated. What a stroke of luck it was. A bad woman! *The* bad woman.

"What'll you give me, dearie?" his companion gasped. "It's 'ard times, you know."

"I've a couple of pounds on me," said Gilbert, "if that will pay for the port. It's . . . all I wan't you know."

The woman looked at him curiously. "Come on, then, old thing," she said.

Still puffing stertorously, she led the way to a dingy house in Tichfield Street, and inserted her key in the door.

"Don't make a noise, dearie, there's a good soul," she murmured huskily, when they stood in the evil-smelling hall.

Gilbert struck a match, and by its light they climbed together to the "first-floor front."

"It's a very respectable 'ouse, this," explained his hostess, when the door had closed behind them.

Gilbert was quite prepared to believe it. When the gas had risen gurgling into incandescence, he took a look round. On the round table in the middle of the room stood an ash-tray, a bottle of port and two glasses. The large bed, waiting in the corner with turned-down coverlet, looked clean and not uninviting. There was a gas stove, too,

and in front of it a couple of arm-chairs covered in rep which had once been wine-coloured, but was now a bilious brown.

"My name's Gertie," panted the lady with ready tact. " 'Aven't we met before now? I seem to know yer face."

"Yes, I think we have," Gilbert lied bravely. "At the Monico, probably, or down in Terry's bar. Towards the end of the war. Let me have your card, Gertie. We must—er—meet again some time. Arrange it beforehand, you know. Go to an hotel somewhere. . . ."

"Why, of course," said Gertie rapturously producing from a drawer a rather frowsy professional card. "It's queer how one runs into old friends. Lor' love us, you did give me a bump!"

Gertie lifted her skirt and petticoat, and laid bare a stretch of upper leg which she proceeded to rub. Her flesh had a sickly pallor; it looked edible but uninviting. Gilbert watched her, horrified and fascinated. After briskly massaging the bruised area, she removed her hat and coat, lit the gas-fire, and drew up the two arm-chairs. He sank into the comfortable expanse of the nearest one and lit a cigarette, while Gertie poured out two bumpers of port wine.

The fire and the pot warmed him agreeably, and he had a foretaste and a pre-vision of the pleasures of middle-age. Slippered ease, peace by the fireside, a generous glass, and in the next

arm-chair a handsome, middle-aged woman, with maternal breasts enclosed chastely in white silk. It was very cosy, very cosy indeed. Perhaps it was the solution of all one's troubles. Another ten years. . . .

Gertie's tact was beyond reproach. She did not seize her visitor with simulated passion, press herself against him and clamour to be kissed. She could do all that when necessary—foreigners in particular expected it—but she saw that what Gilbert wanted was just a drink and a companion. From his appearance she guessed him to be a "theatrical," or else a clergyman in mufti. His black hair, pale face and dark liquid eye vaguely suggested the latter. In any case, she felt in no uneasiness about her present. Didn't he want her to supply evidence? In a smart hotel, too. Just the job she liked. So she gave him his drink and waited for him to talk. She did not have to wait long.

" . . . what I mean is"—Gilbert was just getting into his stride—"we don't any of us know precisely where we stand. We have discarded our pre-war stays of conventional morality, and we have also to a large extent discarded the will to live. You see my point, Gertie?"

"Go on, dear; you do talk lovely," said Gertie.

"We need something to pull us together—a religion, a crusade. We are all numbed, and the consciousness that we are numbed drives us on remorsely to experiment and to sensation. We

haven't an idea what is to grow out of this present chaos and confusion. Nobody knows. There's no one to give any of us a lead. It is among highly educated boys and girls, the fathers and mothers of the next generation, that one can observe the maddened search for experience most clearly. Go to any woman's college, and you'll find all the girls busily exploring their sexual repressions. It's quite dangerous to attend their dances. Cold, scientific, ego-centric, they hail a man as they might a taxi-cab! They jump in, arrive at their destination, jump out again. They think it means nothing to them. They have merely been rounding off their personalities, "satisfying the mysterious needs of the feminine nature"—and so forth, at some poor devil's expense. It's all in their text-books, in the vast pseudo-medical literature which they begin to explore the week after they've bobbed their hair. But it means a good deal more than they think. They have to pay in the end, poor kids. It's sad to see all these children clanking the leaden fetters of free love! Poor dears. They're pathetic. We are all of us pathetic. The fathers, mothers, aunts and uncles are just as pathetic as the boys and girls. To see the chaste and sexless Victorian spinsters struggling to emancipate themselves from their own remorseless virtue is a sight to rend one's heart. And as for the men, the only happy ones to-day are those who wallow in the satisfaction of appetite to the exclusion of thought,

and those whose will to live is supplied by their insatiate greed."

Gilbert was thoroughly enjoying himself now. "The passion to acquire is almost the only passion left. And so we shall have more wars. A few years' breathing-space, and it will all begin again, Gertie. Submarines, poison-gas, and the stench of rotting corpses infecting half the globe. . . ."

Gertie, with trembling hand, replenished Gilbert's glass. She was very frightened, and hadn't the least idea what he was talking about, but she thought him wonderful. He reminded her of the Rev. R. J. Campbell, whom she had once heard, years ago, in the City Temple. It was beautiful to be able to talk like that, to talk and talk, and use such big, fine-sounding words.

"No, we are all like sheep without a shepherd." (Evidently by some strange telepathic process Gertie's thoughts had communicated themselves to Gilbert's brain. He was becoming increasingly like the Rev. R. J. Campbell.) "If the human race is to continue, another Moses must strike the rock, must descend to us from the mountain-top with the tables of the law. Once again the Word must be made flesh, the prophets stoned, and a Christ endure a second crucifixion. That's what we are all waiting for, Gertie—some re-statement of the ancient truths. Not a new religion. There never has been a new religion. Christianity was not a new religion."

"That's what he is," thought Gertie. "A

clergyman gone wrong. Turned out of his pulpit or something."

"There is essentially but one religion," Gilbert continued, with growing fervour, "just as there is essentially but one Truth. It is the light of the Divine Truth, percolating by the faintest of rays into the darkness of the human mind, which alone inspires the race of man and saves it from ignominy. From these faint rays come all art, all beauty, all noble endeavour, all virtue, all morality. The rays may illuminate the befogged brain of the drunkard and the debauchee no less than the brain of the ascetic. And into the brilliant intellects of the great scientist, the world-famous professor, the highly-trained and deeply-read scholar they may fail to find any means of entry whatever, leaving their minds in deeper darkness than are the minds of many despised, humble and uneducated people." The port was really not at all bad. He refreshed himself with a deep draught. ". . . Alas! since most of us, particularly those who have failed to escape the dangers of modern education, live in unrelieved darkness, so we accept and adopt the standards of value set by our distinguished teachers who live in a darkness similar to ours, and so also do we persecute, imprison and despise the *illuminati* whose standards differ from our own. You can only judge things, only test them by holding them up to the light. . . . Darkness, Gertie, propagates darkness. . . ."

A snore, a little shy, well-mannered, subdued snore, crept in and twined itself about Gilbert's discourse. It was followed by another, then a third, then a gentle procession of snores. In repose Gertie looked more than ever maternal. Her great bosom rose and fell gently beneath the white silk blouse; her hands rested upon her ample lap, and her expression was that of a nurse, infinitely kind, who has been looking after a tiresome child all day and is at last exhausted.

Gilbert pulled himself together and laughed quietly. He searched in his pockets for his two pound notes and slipped them into one of Gertie's plump white hands. He laid also three half-crowns by the bottle of port wine and tiptoed out of the room and down the stairs. He, too, was tired—tired, warm and emptied of all his dreams.

CHAPTER X

GILBERT did not, in point of fact, ever avail himself of the professional services of the amiable Gertie. The ex-landgirl, with her robust, common sense, definitely vetoed any such proceeding. "What utter nonsense," she exclaimed, when Gilbert told her of his intention. "You and I have spent three jolly week-ends together at that hotel at Marlow. They know me perfectly well there, by sight. All you have to do is to tell your wife's solicitors to go and search the register. My name won't come into it, though I shouldn't care if it did. But do keep things decent, Gilbert. Can't you see the difference? You and I are normal healthy people who have had a normal and healthy experience together. We aren't lovers now, but we are closer friends than we were before, and we have nothing to be ashamed of. But what you contemplate doing is a sin against sex."

Gilbert was forced to admit Dorothy's sincerity, though he could not share her lack of shame. He allowed himself to be persuaded, and the "evidence" was thus supplied.

When at last the farce in Court was over, and the evening papers had printed their half-column exposures of his depravity, and the half-columns had been read by his friends, and forgotten by them, Gilbert experienced an indescribable sense

of relief. No one could say that he had not done his best to give Chloe her chance of happiness.

He had deserted Cleopatra's roof for an attic flat in Great Ormond Street in Bloomsbury, and there he worked as he had never worked before. His principal diversions were long evenings with Tobey, during which they drank very cheap and very bad red wine and discussed Tobey's new morality. Tobey invariably became intoxicated with his own enthusiasm. It was all so splendid, to be free to love rapturously, to cast off emotional restraint. All the world's evils would disappear if women would free themselves, too! No more prostitution, no more stuffy marriages, no more disease and misery, no more pathological symptoms, or unnatural vice. "Ooooh!" said Tobey, one night, hugging himself with pleasure, "the new generation is wonderful! However, I feel it my duty only to take on the difficult cases. I've got a frightfully hard job now." He proceeded to detail, at great length, the "case history" of Betty Carson, his latest flame. "But I've made enormous progress," he said. "I've got her to *see* things more clearly. In about a month's time we'll go to Italy together. Why don't you come too, and bring Dorothy Dawson? Or is that over?"

Gilbert shuddered. "I'm thankful, for poor Dorothy's sake, that, in one sense, it never really began," he said. "I haven't quite your immoral courage, Tobey," he went on. "It seems to me

that all this 'rational thought' about sex must lead to trouble. Sex is a mystery and it ought to be a sacrament. If this age destroys the monogamous ideal, what is going to take its place?"

"The great thing is to destroy," said Tobey. "Unless you destroy, the builders—whose job it is to do so—cannot build. *I'm* only a professional Heartbreak House-breaker. It is the business of the builders to put up something new and better on the sites prepared for them by our activities!"

Happy Tobey! Six hundred a year, aunts in the peerage, and expectations. How easily things came to him!

Gilbert, after six months among the good workers of Lord Corfe's committee, had got back into a more congenial atmosphere, as literary adviser to a firm of publishers. He read innumerable manuscripts, wrote introductory essays to classical reprints, reviews, "magazine page-articles," anything and everything which he had a chance of selling. His income was enough now to keep him in greater comfort than he had known since the days before his marriage; and he could even afford to amuse himself by attempting to write plays and by experimenting with the short story.

The hard work brought its own satisfaction, but it did not bring peace. Sometimes when he went for a lonely walk after dinner, round Mecklenburgh Square, he found himself hankering after that curious dream-life which had occupied him

before his marriage *débâcle*. Was it possible to recapture those thrills, to be liberated once more from the world of everyday and find again that unforgettable dream-figure, that dream-companion who had opened her arms to him and reproached him for his long tarrying? He tried to drug himself deliberately with dreams, as he had done in the old days. But it was no good. They would not come. He was saved now from the torture of seeing others suffer from his unsuccess. And he was earning enough to keep him in tolerable comfort. He wondered sometimes if it was necessary for him to endure the old agonies in order to recapture his lost compensations? His dream-drug now, in any case, seemed altogether out of his reach, and at present there was nothing in his life to take its place. A sense of loneliness invaded him despite the energy with which he worked, of loneliness and futility.

Very often he went over in his mind, in retrospect, that first occasion when he had experienced the mysterious thrill of passing over the border from the real world into the dream-world. The figure on the bridge still haunted him; and he could hear again, as clearly as if he had heard them but a moment earlier, her low soft laugh and the words which she had uttered. "When are you coming to me, Gilbert?" Where was she? Would he meet her in this world, or could he only find her by putting an end to an earthly existence which seemed to have no longer any attraction

for him or any purpose? Was the real message which she had sought to give him a warning that his quest for her, on earth, was a vain one and a promise that she would be waiting for him when he crossed the invisible frontier?

Where these thoughts might have led him, had not Tobey intervened, he did not care, subsequently, to speculate. Tobey, seeing that he was once again getting into a morbid condition of mind, insisted on dragging him away for a holiday to Dorsetshire. They stayed in a small inn, in a Purbeck village, bathed every day from a deserted beach, went for long walks over the downs, drank large quantities of Dorset beer, and slept like children. Nature asserted herself, and Gilbert soon recovered from his temptations to experience the thrill of self-destruction. After all, there were many lesser thrills still to be enjoyed. And Tobey's infectious high spirits constituted in themselves a pill to purge melancholy.

Gilbert returned to London a changed being and threw himself with fresh energy into work which, for a man of his upbringing and experience, was full of interest. He was growing increasingly reconciled to a lonely existence when a chance glimpse of Moyra Burden—if indeed it was she—passing upon the top of an omnibus, re-opened an old sore. He debated the question as to whether he should write to her and suggest a meeting. Ten to one she would accept an invitation to dinner. But there was also the risk of a snub.

He had been snubbed by her once. It rankled. He wondered whether it was the wound which she had given his vanity, at the time when he had sought consolation at her hands from Chloe's disloyalty, which was the real secret of his continued interest in her. They had not been lovers, but they had at least been something more than friends—a tantalizing something more. As the weeks went by, he found himself thinking about her more frequently than he cared to acknowledge. When he did once refer to her in the course of a conversation with Tobey, that experienced philosopher only made the laconic reply: "Don't be an idiot."

CHAPTER XI

Miss Miriam Carmichael's flat in Cheyne Walk had long been a headquarters of respectable uplift, of very patriotic demi-semi-pacifism and very safe philanthropy. She loved playing with movements; touching them gingerly at the end of a small subscription; going to their drawing-room meetings—provided, of course, that the meetings were held in the sort of houses to which one went, and that one met at them the kind of people one knew. She liked, above everything, to feel daring. Had she not gathered her friends together to listen to a Professor who had actually made some criticisms on the Treaty of Versailles? To be progressive like that was altogether in the note just now—like psycho-analysis. The real intelligentsia, the "interior" set, had quite given up being reactionary and *Morning Post*-ish. It was surprising how many of them took in *The Daily Herald!*

Among Miss Carmichael's progressive heroes Lord Corfe held a high place. Where he led, she usually followed. She was on his "special list." With the "free literature" which invariably gushed forth from the committees over which he presided, it was his custom to send a personal letter beginning, "My dear Miss Carmichael." The personal letter accompanying the leaflets about the Black-

and-Tan activities in Ireland (which it had been part of Gilbert's duties to have printed and distributed) had been of such an unusually persuasive character that Miss Carmichael found herself stirred to action. Here was a matter which the leaders of the intellectual life of England, the high lights of literature and learning, must get together and discuss. Where could they do it better than in her drawing-room at Cheyne Walk? "I feel," she said, over the teacups, to *dear* Mary Boyle-Martin, Lord Corfe's eldest daughter, "that we writers really *must* do something about Ireland. I shall devote *my Fridays*."

And so the Fridays were devoted. The night for which Gilbert received his card was the super-Friday, the night of nights, last and greatest of the series. The card came to him correctly addressed to his flat in Great Ormond Street, and on the bottom of it was written in ink, "Do come! M.C." It was some months since he had left the Irish Freedom Society and deserted the Jugo-Slavian Babies, and over a year since he had seen Miriam Carmichael, so that the arrival of the invitation piqued his curiosity. He wondered whether Chloe had seen her and introduced George; or whether she had heard rumours only of their separation, and wanted to pump him for details. In any case, he decided to go.

When the evening came he dined with Tobey at his club and went on afterwards to Chelsea, arriving at Cheyne Walk at half-past nine. When

he entered the big drawing-room the Bishop was smiling benignly over a wide expanse of shirt-fronts and bare powdered necks. Miss Carmichael, a tall and imposing woman with white hair and straight black eyebrows, received him with an excited Ssh! and propelled him across the floor until he found a cushion at the Bishop's feet. The Bishop had almost reached his peroration. There was silence while Gilbert subsided. Then somebody coughed impressively. The Bishop smiled at the floor, he smiled at the ceiling: and then he continued. "In conclusion," he said, "I want you all to remember that the Irishman is a queer fellow. . . a very queer fellow. . . but he's sound at heart. We must all. . . every one of us. . . in our several ways and in our several spheres. . . in accordance with our opportunities . . . do what little we can to help him build up the life of his country on sure foundations. And, above everything, when these troubles are over and done with, and the crimes which have been committed by him in the heat of passion are but an evil memory, we — by showing him that we are ready to forgive — must help him to put away the past and to step forward into a bright future of happiness, prosperity and peace."

The Bishop ended in a warm glow which disseminated itself in waves throughout the room. Miss Carmichael's eyes were glistening. The pretty bosoms of the young women, enclosed in the silk and lace of their becoming and expensive

frocks, were in a tumult of virginal emotion. In the pause which followed the Bishop's pronouncement Gilbert looked round the room and smiled at his acquaintances. Then, glancing at his immediate neighbours, he saw, with a sudden thrill, that Moyra Burden was sitting quite close to him. A curious uncomfortable quiver ran down his spine. The blood rushed to his face, then left it paler than usual. He cursed himself for being so moved by the encounter. Moyra, meanwhile, watched him gravely. Then she smiled. "I wondered how long you were going to cut me!" she said. But they could not talk yet. Mr. Russell Rowton, the eminent literary critic, had risen from his chair. Mr. Rowton let drop an eyeglass before speaking. "I think," he said, "that the Bishop's noble words will find an echo in the hearts of every one in this room. I understand that a suggestion has been made that our thoughts and feelings should be made articulate in a manifesto. I should like to propose, if I may, that we ask Mr. Fuddleston Brassery, whom we are all honoured to have among us this evening, to undertake the drafting of this manifesto, which should, in my view, be signed by not more than half a dozen of our most eminent men — and women — of letters. What I feel is that all the names, should, like that of Mr. Brassery, carry weight. . . . "

Mr. Brassery, whose twenty-five stone of flesh (but scarcely of blood) had been famous for so

long in London drawing-rooms, himself led the laughter, in which the Bishop joined with a Homeric peal. When Mr. Brassery's own falsetto bray had subsided, one of the débutantes was heard to whisper, "Isn't dear Mr. Brassery just *too* sweet about his fatness!" Mr. Rowton was thrown off his stroke by Mr. Brassery's sense of humour. He inserted his eyeglass, tried to think of an epigram, failed, dropped his eyeglass, and grinned uncomfortably.

Mr. Brassery, who now had the room with him, saved him from his quandary. He accepted the invitation to draft the manifesto. "Something quite short and moderate in its terms. No use going to extremes!"

"Do you think Mr. Mortimer Blood would sign?" Miss Carmichael asked, in a shiver of excitement.

"Well," said Mr. Brassery, "all that I know is that I met Mr. Blood this afternoon, and he told me that in regard to Ireland there were positively *no* lengths to which he would not go."

With Mr. Blood — the Northcliffe of poetry, the Napoleon of literary journalism — backing the movement, everyone felt that peace with Ireland was assured. "He said he'd be here this evening," Miss Carmichael remarked rather plaintively. And no sooner had she spoken than a step was heard upon the stairs. Full of regard for her grammar, she emitted an ecstatic "That's he!" And he it was. For some moments he stood

framed impressively in the doorway, a red rose in the buttonhole of his dark tweed coat and a stray lock of white hair falling over one side of his glasses, like ivy festooned over a window-pane. Miss Carmichael, clasping the hand which she had just shaken, led him across to the best and largest cushion, while the room throbbed with the magnetic waves of her excitement.

With the arrival of Mr. Blood the party definitely became a "meeting" and settled down to business. Miss Carmichael secured Mr. Blood's consent to sign Mr. Brassery's manifesto. (Mr. Brassery tittered, for some secret reason: Gilbert loved him for it.) "And Mr. Russell Rowton, too?"

"But the manifesto will be nothing without the name of our distinguished hostess," Mr. Rowton gallantly riposted. Miss Carmichael gave a quick, coy smile; then concealed her satisfaction by becoming business-like. "I think we ought to keep the list of signatories quite short," she observed. "Half a dozen names, at the outside." Mr. Blood nodded his assent.

There came a pause, and now Miss Carmichael, as a good hostess, tactfully indicated that the obscurities and the semi-obscurities might "say something." The complete obscurities butted in gaily, while the semi-obscurities and the almost well-known did their best to pull themselves together.

After some moments of rather desultory talk,

Miss Carmichael made a diversion (which she ever afterwards regretted) by asking Moyra what she thought of it all, as an Irishwoman. So there was a "real" Irish girl there! Everyone looked up, beaming. How pretty she was too! The Bishop beamed, Mr. Russell Rowton beamed. Moyra's personal vanity kindled at once her terrific racial swank. She felt a sudden desire just to show these half-baked Londoners, with their awful "kindness" and their hypercritical "moderation" (which was the outward sign of their hatred of clear thinking), precisely what they looked like to a pair of blue Irish eyes.

The octopus got its tentacles into good working order and set them in motion, and Gilbert watched, with secret laughter, the deliberate deployment of charm. Moyra talked easily and well; and almost covered up the painful things she said by the agreeable manner in which she said them. The brogue and the wistful smile were also to the fore. She began by pointing out that most decent, intelligent, and really patriotic English people scarcely needed "conversion" at this time of day. A great many writers and artists had already protested, as far as they were able, when the Black-and-Tans burnt Balbriggan, ages ago. Hadn't Mr. Vayle and his friends got out a manifesto which scores of people had signed? After all, the atrocities were becoming ancient history now. The Irish cause would not be helped by any sentimental outcry against them. One of the most hopeful

signs for Ireland was America's attitude towards her debtors and the *Daily Mail Anti-Waste* campaign. The present Irish policy was an orgie of waste, and sooner or later the public would realise it, and then there would be a settlement. It was far better for well-meaning English people to leave passion for those who could feel it. . .and concentrate on the business side of the question . . .the wasted money, the disorganised trade, and the resulting unemployment. As to the moral aspects of the whole thing, after all, they couldn't expect Irish people to keep the Englishman's conscience. Of course, it was only natural that Christians and decent men in England should wish to dissociate themselves from their country's "regrettable incidents," and to issue manifestoes protesting their abhorence of them. But, after all, that was *their* lookout, wasn't it? It didn't affect Ireland or the Irish.

Moyra turned her phrases prettily, and covered up her points with soft words and charming smiles, but they only pricked the deeper for that. Miss Carmichael grew crimson with irritation. To think that all this had been let loose on the defenceless head of Mr. Mortimer Blood, the editor of the *Olympian Review,* perhaps the most influential man of letters in the English-speaking world! It had been so difficult to arouse Mr. Blood's interest in the Irish question. Miss Carmichael had worked *so* hard, and indeed if it had not been for the Bishop of Blandford's help she

would not have succeeded at all. And now here was this wretched young woman from Dublin, upsetting eveything! That was the annoying thing about the Irish. They made things so impossible for those who were trying to help them. They refused to understand the generosity of the English character. With the Armenians (before their regrettable extermination) how different it had been! She thought of her Armenian Fridays, the excitement of the year before last. But one must not weary in well-doing. After all, the really *nice* Irish people, the sort one really *knew*, were never as *intransigeante* as this tiresome Burden girl.

The conversation rippled on all round her, but respected Miss Carmichael's absorption. She stood thinking about Mr. Yeats and dear Mr. Lennox Robinson, and the Abbey Theatre and Synge (that wonderful "Playboy") and the Celtic Twilight, and the crooning voices of the colleens, and the bogs and mists and mountains, the "shillelaghs," "jaunting-cars" and Paddies. They all blended in her mind, making a vague, emotional stirabout which restored her satisfaction. Oh, no! However dangerous and difficult it might be for a leader of literary society to take up Ireland at this juncture, it was certainly the right thing to do, the progressive thing. And how charming it was of Lord and Lady Corfe to invite her to their castle in Wicklow. Just fancy, a wonderful old tumble-down Irish castle, in the middle

of the mountains! It would be nice to go there — of course, when everything was settled down. And Mary Boyle-Martin had promised to take her one Sunday to see dear A. E., the poet-philosopher, who must be really too sweet, with his shaggy beard and his strong glasses and his pipe. . . .

Miss Carmichael, tall, white-haired, elegant, with her fresh complexion and her coal-black eyebrows, was really a most impressive figure, and when she was silent and lost in a day-dream Gilbert found himself warming towards her. She was a good sort, really, despite her absurdity!

It was some time before he could detach Moyra from the circle of admirers who had gathered round her. Good heavens, the girl had completely forgotten Ireland! She was in an ecstasy, talking literary gossip to the big names, rallying old Fuddleston about his latest book. At last, however, she turned to him, and he suggested that they should share a taxi back to Bloomsbury. It was getting late. Several people had already made their adieux. Miss Carmichael, as Gilbert passed in Moyra's wake, gave him a meaning, sentimental handshake.

CHAPTER XII

A CONSTRAINT fell upon them when they emerged into the night and walked along by the riverside towards the cab-rank. A hot golden moon made a pathway of light down the stream, and the leaves of the trees on the Embankment murmured in the tense, restless dark. For a moment, before hailing their taxi, they leant together over the stone parapet and looked down at the water that was alive, and secret, and purposeful, and mysterious, and menacing. Neither spoke, but Gilbert was conscious of Moyra's steady and unwavering glance. The prominent, grave blue eyes were fixed upon him, taking him in, appraising him. "You've changed, Gilbert," she said at last, as they moved away.

In the cab, on their way home, they talked at first on ordinary topics — on books and pictures and places — and underneath their casual surface conversation was another, not spoken in words. Gilbert was conscious that on Moyra's side their friendship was not dead, and this consciousness soothed and comforted. He had been clumsy and over-emotional; and she had shrunk from him because she couldn't help it. He had frightened her, perhaps because she was not really as indifferent as she had pretended to be, nor he the mere philanderer. What a peculiar and subtle instru-

ment was the body, the body of woman even more than that of man! It exercised its influence in every kind of friendship, including the most platonic, in ways hard to discover, so cleverly did the conscious mind conceal them. A man usually thought only of one kind of physical expression for his emotion: the ultimate expression, the consummation. That attitude was too crude for the modern world; too crude, at all events, for the modern woman.

"And Chloe?" he asked, after a pause.

"Oh, yes, I've seen her," Moyra replied. "She's changed even more than you have, Gilbert. Changed for the better, too. She's, somehow, more herself. I don't know that she's any happier; but she certainly feels safer. They are in George's old flat in Westminister, you know."

"Then you think that to live with me means to live dangerously?" Gilbert asked.

Moyra nodded, and laughed. "That is the secret of your attraction, perhaps, for one kind of woman. Not for Chloe, though. You didn't hold her firmly enough; and she had no strength of her own to give you back, in return for the energy she took out of you. You ought to marry your grandmother, Gilbert. You'll never be happy with a woman till you find one foolish enough, and fond enough, to give you all the things you need, and go on giving them."

"Aren't you the wise one!" exclaimed Gilbert.

"And where have you learnt all this worldly wisdom from?"

"From the world," Moyra replied. "I've seen a great deal more of your nasty London since we met last."

"Well, nasty London, at first hand, is better than any of your *paradis artificiels* that you used to find in the poems of your literary heroes. You've changed too, you know, Moyra."

"Coarsened, I expect."

"Enough to live and flourish in the fresh air, instead of in the hothouse? Well, I hope so. I doubt it."

"I don't think we really know a great deal about one another," said Moyra. "I'm sure now that I don't know very much about myself. I only know one thing. When I told you you would find me a disappointment, it was true. I've nothing to give, my dear — that you want."

"The point to me is, is there a chance that you would ever want to give it, if you had it to give? The intention, in the Catholic sense, is all important, Moyra."

Moyra looked out of the window of the cab at the blank faces of the houses which swept past them, a long gauntlet of inquisitive eyes.

"I don't know," she said at last. "I don't believe I could ever give up my work. You don't understand what it means to me, Gilbert, and I don't suppose you ever will. Men are different in that way. They don't throw themselves into

their jobs as women do — nor for that matter, into their love affairs. Men leave the back door open despite all their tears. But women can't escape so easily. . . ."

The cab drew up with a scrunch before Moyra's flat. She kissed him good-bye; it was a renewal of their friendship. Was it friendship? Gilbert watched her let herself into the dark hall of her house with a curious mixture of emotions. Why was it that his type of man should be doomed forever to pursue the elusive and the unattainable, in life as well as in art? Moyra, the never-to-be-possessed, could hold him as a girl like Dorothy, with all her courage, her youth, her clean and frank acceptance of physical union, could never hold him. And with Dorothy he could have ease, and comfort, and a home, and cheerfulness, and children. And with Moyra would come — what? Only frustration and agony, most likely. He was a fool for his pains — a fool: and he knew it.

He dismissed the taxi and walked on through the warm night towards his flat. Murmurs came from the mysterious houses, and he looked speculatively at the dark and at the lighted windows. What was happening behind all those drab facades, what dreams charmed or disturbed the sleepers, what hopes and fears haunted those who lay awake, what vows were being exchanged between happy lovers, what bitter words were rising to the lips of those whose love was dead? As he walked slowly through the empty streets

there came to him an overwhelming emotion of sympathy, of kinship with his fellow-men. It was something bigger than family feeling and acknowledgment, in the conventional sense, of the tie of kindred. In his sensitised condition he felt united with all humanity, clean of every hatred, fulfilled with love. In all those dark or darkly glowing houses were men and women, tormented with desires, grappling with all the normal and the abnormal human appetites, loving, hoping, suffering, and struggling — all of them — towards some goal, indefinable and indistinct, and never-to-be-reached. All, at the bottom of their hearts, were like children, puzzled by things they could not understand, haunted by the swift shadows of the Great Reality which never may be understood. And to escape from the terror of these shadows they played — to divert their minds, to secure a measure of ease and forgetfulness — with riches and poverty and business and pleasure and politics and passions, with hatreds and with loves, with wars and revolutions, played with them until the last and deepest shadow fell across their paths and they could play no more.

CHAPTER XIII

"Every day in every way I grow better and better and better." Cleopatra's lips drooped, her head fell back against the rim of her canopied garden-chair, and she looked dejectedly at the geraniums in the flower-bed in front of her. She didn't feel in the least bit better. The brass-beaded rosary dropped from her plump hand on to the grass, coiling itself snake-like on the cool earth. It was no good; however much "better" she might become in every way, she'd never become as placid as a geranium, as hard as a brass bead. And that was just what, after her muddled fashion, she wanted to become — quite, quite placid and beautiful and hard. These bits of girls and boys who came to Belsize Towers didn't understand what it was like to *feel* things. The boys, particularly, hadn't any feelings. What they called love! Why, it was just like their dinners. They none of them understood a woman's heart. Poor Prudence. Poor dear Prudence. Poor dear, dear Prudence! Tears of compassion began to trickle down Cleopatra's large lined face. They ran down the wrinkled neck; they endangered the purple silk jumper; she couldn't find her hankie anywhere. She hunted for it. Her vast bulk began to grow agitated and she sniffed vigorously in her distress. She *meant* well. She knew she meant

well. But somehow she wasn't clever enough to *do* well. It didn't come out right! Oh dear! oh dear! Her eye fell on the brass beads sacred to the Coué system. She clutched them, together with a handful of grass, closed her eyes and with the convulsive fervour of a devotee began once more: "Every day, in every way I grow better and better and better and better."

"Nonsense, Cleopatra, you're quite perfect as you are. You've got an inferiority complex, that's all that is the matter with you."

It was that wicked Tobey. He stood looking down at her with affectionate amusement. He didn't seem to know how wicked he was.

"It isn't right, Tobey, the way you've treated Prudence," sniffed Cleopatra, in great agitation. "She's eating her heart out, and you aren't worth it."

"Of course I'm not," said Tobey. "That's why the way I treated her was the right way. Otherwise she'd never be eating me out of her heart. She'd never get over me. Now she will. And she'll be all the better. They always are better, Cleopatra. I'm a good worker, after my own system, if you only understood it."

Cleopatra looked at him, open-mouthed, with knitted forehead. If only her poor old brain would function when she wanted it to! She knew she had a reply somewhere, a devastating reply.

"When I was a girl . . ." she began.

"Quite," said Tobey, good naturedly. "But you see we are busy changing all that."

"Don't believe it," Cleopatra snapped.

"Oh, but we are."

"Don't tell me. You can't."

"We can."

"Look at Prudence, then. She's your wife, but you aren't her husband. It means everything to a chit of a child like that — the first man. And you just laugh. Oh, I hate you, Tobey, I hate you! The only love you understand is self-love."

"Reasoned egoism is a nicer name for it, dear," Tobey replied, in his most luscious voice. "It's a very wonderful quality. Makes me irresistible. What woman is there who can stand an unselfish man who is devoted to her? Why, it takes the ginger out of life for them. They prefer the egoist every time. A conflict of egoisms leads to trouble, of course. But mating of egoisms, even a temporary one, is sublime. Besides, it allows both parties to preserve their self-respect."

"But what about Prudence?"

"Dear Prudence! What about her? Is she in? I thought of going to the theatre with her to-night. I might even pay for her, if it's a gallery, deeply against my principles as it is to do anything of the kind."

"A gentleman always paid *everything* when I was a girl, as a matter of course."

"And got it all back when he married, and the

girl's soul and body into the bargain! Bad, Cleopatra; very bad. That's another thing we've changed. We are human beings first now, and sexual animals afterwards. Girls have to learn to pay their way honestly with their own money, not with kisses and cajolery."

Tobey sat on the grass, laid his honey-coloured head on Cleopatra's knees, and gazed tranquilly at the blue sky. Cleopatra wanted to let her fingers stray through his curly hair. He was a *very* naughty boy. But she couldn't be angry with him. And he had so many explanations for everything he did which made them *seem* right. It was her instinct only which made her certain he was wrong.

Prudence now came shuffling into the garden like a gawky schoolgirl, her bare feet stuffed into house-slippers. When she saw Tobey her face lit up and she grinned a boyish grin.

"Hullo," she said, stuffing her hands in the pockets of her skirt. She sat down at Cleopatra's feet and leaned, like Tobey, her head against those large maternal knees.

"My poor dear children!" gasped Cleopatra, in a flurry of maternal emotion.

But Tobey counted among his principal virtues an entire absence of sentimentality; and he had no intentions of indulging in any heart-to-heart talk, with Cleopatra as mother-confessor. He disregarded her tears and sighs and plunged at once into an animated conversation about Gilbert.

"Prudence, I've got a job for you," he said.

Prudence smiled and gurgled with pleasure. "I hope it isn't any more socks," she replied. "I'm tired of your socks, Tobey. If you weren't so stingy you'd buy some new pairs."

"It isn't socks, it's my unfortunate friend Gilbert. Cleopatra, if we don't all take care that young man will be entangled a second time in all the horrors of matrimony. I see it coming on. I know the type to which his Moyra belongs. Repressed and over-educated Irish middle-class school-marm. They pretend there isn't an Irish middle-class but, my God, it's the worst in the world. Dublin is worse than Surbiton, more full of tuppenny-farthing cliques, and sets, and congregations than — Watford. And Gilbert is on the brink, hovering on the very verge. He *must* be saved. He's too good to waste. Prudence must take the matter in hand, exert a good influence on him."

"You are an idiot, Tobey, at times," said Prudence, tossing her curly, bobbed brown head. "What have I got to do with it? Gilbert and I are very good friends. I love him because he's sentimental and old fashioned, like I am."

"Prudence!" Tobey turned to her a horror-stricken face.

"Quite right, dearie," sighed Cleopatra. "It's a mercy you've the pluck to own it."

"Well, it's true," said Prudence, "and I can't help it. I wish I could, now. Gilbert's the same

as me, really. If you want to throw a siren across his path, why don't you try Iseult? At least she's lovely, with her mop of red hair and her bright eyes and her long legs. But why you can't leave Gilbert alone I can't imagine. I've seen Moyra, and I should think they get along awfully well. I hope they *do* marry, so there!"

"And after all my educational efforts, Prudence. It's too disheartening!"

"I've a good mind to close the house and send you all away," said Cleopatra, with sudden vehemence. "You sicken me, that's what you do. If you don't give up this young person you say you're going to Italy with, and come back here and do the decent by Prudence, I'm through with you, Tobey, and that's all about it. You've done nothing but harm these last two years, and God help me, through listening to your nonsense and swallowing it for gospel I've bin as bad. I ought to have spent me money on 'orspitals or saving the starving German and Austrian children — on anything rather than on running this house for the likes of you. I don't hold with a wife being too strait-laced with her husband, provided he's kind to her and keeps the home going. Let him have his fling, the dirty dog, if he *must* have it, and provided he doesn't advertise it in everybody's face. The same with the wife. If the husband can't make her happy, then he ought to let someone else do it, provided she is loyal to the home and doesn't make a fool of him. But barring any

real reason for splitting apart, what I say is one wife, one husband, one home, one family. If a couple can't be faithful to each other's bodies, and sometimes it's a job, I admit, what I say is, let them be faithful and loyal to the home and the family. A little bit of unhappiness don't do nobody no harm. And it's worth it in the end. What are you saving up for yourself, Tobey, I should like to know? Ten years of gout in a club arm-chair, most likely."

"Cleopatra, you're a renegade," Tobey sighed. "You are going back on us all."

"Well, I'm tired of helping you to your own damnation," said Cleopatra. "If there was any real *love* in you, I wouldn't mind it. But don't tell *me*. *I* know what love is — you don't."

"So you said before," Tobey replied. "But it doesn't make it true."

Cleopatra relapsed into an outraged silence, and clutched furiously at her brass beads. Presently she felt a touch upon her hand. It was Prudence. The girl dragged the strong, pathetic hand, with its gnarled finger-joints and square, flat nails, down to her lips and kissed it, while Tobey, bored and disappointed, strolled off to play Scriabine in the music-room. He wanted to get away to the Yorkshire moors, to throw back his hatless head — and laugh. The older he grew the more convinced he was that the two most important things in life are food and sex. Human-

ity's essential sacraments: our daily bread. As his fingers touched the keyboard, he realised that the life of the schoolmaster is far from enviable. No wonder he gets long holidays. He needs them!

CHAPTER XIV

After the renewal of their friendship at Miriam Carmichael's party Gilbert and Moyra met frequently. They went to picture galleries, and to theatres, dined together two or three nights a week, lent one another books — in short, took up their acquaintance at the point where it had been broken off and developed it until it became the most important thing in both their lives. Gilbert, hungry for affection yet at the same time disillusioned, would hardly have been human if the friendship had not, on his side, developed into something which he mistook for love. And Moyra, without consciously doing so, employed upon him all the arts of the coquette. Her easy, passionless kisses were his for the asking. She made professions of being "outside conventional morality"; and she was no prude. But she never pretended to any real warmth of feeling, and to Gilbert, who watched her closely, it was clear enough that there was something lacking in her. But his hopes and desires constantly defeated his judgment. He told himself that in time the capacity to love would come to her; that when it came her egoism and the small meannesses and cruelties which went with it would disappear and be forgotten. Love would warm her whole nature, give her generosity of thought and deed. Several

times he asked her to go away with him, but she refused — not because she objected on principle to doing so, but merely because the limitations of Gilbert's purse made it impossible for him to suggest a tour which seemed sufficiently attractive. At last the success of a sentimental love story put him in funds, and he was able to propose an autumn journey to Paris and to Florence, during her vacation. She accepted this with evident pleasure, and the date was fixed for their departure.

At half-past nine in the morning, on the day when they had arranged to start on the momentous journey, Gilbert was rubbing his soaped chin with the shaving brush and wondering what on earth was in store for them. He looked at himself in the glass; he looked at his watch. There was still an hour and a half before the train went. So they were actually going away together. Another experiment! His heart sank with despondency as he thought of it. Moyra, with all her charm and beauty, was really the type of girl who ought to go either to a psycho-analyst or to a nunnery. His brain told him this much, and the more clearly it warned him the more ardently did his hopes give him the lie. Love would come to her, nature would see him through, the blue Italian skies would smile on them and save them and give them happiness. No more entanglements this time. Moyra hated the idea of marriage and didn't want children. They would be free. They would put

the new theories of Tobey and his friends to the test, and make a beautiful relationship which would enable him to forget the past. And all the time his brain said "Fool!"

Another experiment, Mr. Gilbert Vayle! Haven't you had enough of them? You've been a hubby in a little flat. It would have been a conventional middle-class marriage of the vaguely "art" type if you'd had a little job and a steady little income — so you may be said to have experienced *that*. You made a mess of it. Then you've lived in Cleopatra's menagerie and watched the younger generation experimenting in what, poor darlings, they call free love. You've had a spell of philandering yourself — till you found it degrading. (Aren't you *ever* satisfied?) You've worked with the good workers, for the Jugo-Slavian Babies; and with the political idealists for Irish self-determination; you've re-inspected the social altitudes of literary London; and now you've gone back to your old groove — an office: catching the tube at half-past nine every morning and at half-past five every afternoon. Well, you've had a good sniff at the muddle and chaos in which we are living, and you've been thoroughly muddled and chaotic yourself. Tell us, what the hell do you make of it all? Do you like "progress" with all its mistakes, its absurdities, its incidental casualties and its splendid faith? Or do you, at the bottom of your heart, believe in safety and tradition and inherited instinct and the

conventions *à la* Maynard Brown? Are you a sentimentalist, covering up the gratification of appetite with garments of emotion; or a realist and a connoisseur of physical pleasure; or an idealist, trying to transform, to sublimate, to repress and to preserve? And what about this Moyra? Do you love her, or are you merely exasperated by her. Do you honestly believe that you and she can ever mate? With all your experience, with all your knowledge of the *physique de l'amour,* have you really any hope of being able to play Pygmalion to Moyra's Galatea?

The cold sponge, vigorously applied, cooled a little Gilbert's sizzling brain. He seized his collar and tie, and began to put them on.

Well, anyway, for her sake as well as for his own, he would have to try. The Platonic relation might be all very well for the jaded debauchee. But for vigorous and healthy people — it was absurd, an affront to the Creator. Moyra's peculiarities were not virtues to be imitated, but diseases to be cured. Would he be able to cure them? Probably not. And yet they had their friendship: and it was valuable. . . .

Come, Mr. Gilbert Vayle. Love lightly! No surrender, sir. The nature of the creative man is many-sided. It has room for everything — work, friendship, amourettes, ideal passions. Let everything be accepted and enjoyed — the ego in command. Lend, but don't give. Keep your end up, *mon ami,* you are too old for this folly.

You are starting on a fool's errand. The only thing you can't get fineness out of is refinement. Tobey is right. Refinement is a disease. Is the sea refined, or the sunlight, or the hot earth full of corruption bursting into flower? Give us a stiff glass of pornography: there's truth, at least, in its dregs. A touch of reality! Silly ass, even to dream of trying to alter your nature to suit hers. Nature getting at you, to enable you to breed. That's all Nature cares about. If you fail with her, you fail. She's not for you. You've made another mistake. Well, what about it? The world won't stop, the blue Italian sky won't darken, it won't interfere with the march of the seasons nor bring you one step nearer to the waiting grave. "The grave's a fine and private place!" Marvell, like the genius he was, had the sense to pour his little torments on to paper. Canalised energy. The artist is bi-sexual: father and mother. He engenders, and after shaping and moulding his work in the womb of his mind, with agony he brings forth. Art battens upon thwarted passion. Fools say that artists lead miserable lives. What nonsense! Sterility — that's our only real unhappiness. We can't have any others worth writing home about. The conventional disaster for us, is just a natural pain like the pains of labour. That's better, then. Now you've cleared it up, a bit. Live alone and die alone. We all have to. Our Father, which art in Heaven, hallowed be Thy Name.

Gad, it's a quarter past ten. We'll miss the train. And after all these months! What an anti-climax.

Vayle rushed into the bathroom, cleaned the razor and stuffed it into his sponge-bag; twisted the sponge up in his towel and put his foot upon it to squeeze out the water; threw in tooth-brush, nail-brush; collected tubes and bottles and nail scissors and spare studs and packed them as best he could in the already bulging suit-case. He took a last look round the flat in the hope of finding some of the many things which he knew he must have forgotten, then hurried out into the street. By good fortune he stopped a taxi-cab just outside the door. "Victoria," he gasped. "Continental station."

Moyra was waiting for him by the bookstall, where they had agreed to meet. She had been waiting some time, but was not the one to show impatience. "Well I thought you'd thrown me over," she said, smiling at him and blushing slightly. The little devil. The coquette. The colder a woman is, the more she delights in rousing a man and the more cunningly she does it. Sex at second-hand: they can't dodge it altogether, can't turn off *all* the taps, unless they're withered, sapless creatures. High percentage, though, of incomplete women in the British Isles. Ten per cent?

"Look at here," said Moyra, pointing to the bookstall. "Aren't you the great man?" There

was the immortal work, by the dozen, in a glaring wrapper. A long line of it, just out in "cheaps." "The Silent Stranger," by Gilbert Vayle.

"Love and tears," said Vayle, with a laugh. "Sob-stuff. Broken-hearts all seccotined in the last chapter. Sentiment laid on with a trowel! Their hearts begin to palpitate in Chapter One. Palpitations increase steadily throughout the book. Thank God, you haven't read it, my dear. But I got ten thousand dollars for the film rights of the damn thing. Never made so much money before in my life, at one go."

"Well, you ought to invest it sensibly," said Moyra, "instead of wasting money on pullmans."

"Nonsense. *Avanti Savoia!* We'll go to Venice and buy a palace with it, if the exchange allows it."

The porter took their luggage and they esconced themselves in their green arm-chairs. A vague aroma of stockbroker and leading lady, off to "Paree" for an illicit honeymoon, pervaded the *wagon-salon.* Examples of the type strolled in and settled themselves among their plutocratic baggage. The ladies opened little bags and dabbed themselves mysteriously. They took out tiny handkerchiefs and put them back again. They made eyes and *moues* at their men, while the men sucked their cigars amorously, and ruminated as to whether they should lunch on the train or on the boat.

Moyra had never travelled before, save from

Ireland. She was in a flutter of excitement, unbecoming a lecturer on Literature at the Gurney College for Women. She forgot to wonder how much or how little she cared for Gilbert. This was her own experience, all her own. He couldn't share it, bless his heart. He was thinking of her: but she was dreaming of Paris. Paris at last. Shades of Baudelaire and of Verlaine; the Quartier Latin, poets, painters, Bohemians, the Boul' Mich,' the trees in the Luxembourg Gardens, the Louvre! All the bag of tricks! Her prominent blue eyes glittered and her heart beat rapidly as the train ran through pleasant, undistinguished Kent. She looked blankly at the tame English country-side, but didn't see it. But Gilbert kept his eyes glued to the window and felt his heart torn with a curious tenderness for his own country. It was so unpretentious, so prettily up and down, so appealing. The oast houses stood up two and two, like giant Brownies' caps; the old red farmhouses squatted down among the barns and the stables and the cowsheds with maternal placidity, watching year after year the mysteries of birth and death, of sowing and of harvesting. The trees, in their autumn loveliness of gold and brown, sent through his mind an orgasmic thrill of pleasure. Beautiful as London was, it had not this inhuman beauty. Even the trees in its parks and gardens were tamed and humanised, held prisoners in a surrounding sea of humans. But here the trees were still free, they

lived their own lives among their peers, could talk to one another in their own language, with none to overhear.

The train ran through Folkestone, then along by the stone-coloured sea. Dover Town. The leading ladies and the stockbrokers stopped eyeing one another like prize-fighters in the ring and began to collect respectively their fur-coats and their vanity-bags. The ladies opened their little bags and closed them again; took out tiny squares of silk and put them back; opened pocket-glasses, dabbed, patted and smiled. The train ran on to the pier, slowed down, stopped. The porters swarmed and shouted. First stage over. Paris in six hours now!

Moyra was a good sailor. They lunched on board heartily, the sea air giving an edge to their appetites. Gilbert drank double-whiskies ritualistically, as a specific against *mal de mer*. He had always drunk whisky on Channel packets, since his schooldays. It was one of the recognized dissipations of travel.

Soon the chalk cliffs faded, and the familiar white lighthouse at Calais and the big station building loomed through the greyness of the October afternoon. The engine-room bell went "ping-ping." The packet slowed up; the passengers surged towards the gangway; the blue-overalled porters crowded upon the quay, pointed to the brass numbers on their bosoms and made frantic gestures of invitation. Gilbert caught the

eye of *Quarante-neuf;* and in another few minutes they were off the ship, on foreign soil.

It was a delight to see Moyra so happy. She sat very close to him in the train, linked her arm in his, and became as excited as a child. She seemed suddenly to yield herself to him, and he refused to spoil his own happiness by attributing it to the fact that he was giving her a "treat." Cynicism and middle-age went hand-in-hand, and surely he had some youth left?

They did not talk much in the train: both were happy in their different ways. To Moyra the flying landscape was a continuous excitement, to Gilbert a perpetual reminder. And the thin arm linked in his seemed to warm his whole being: the dead heart seemed to come to life again with a vengeance. "The grass that has oftentimes been trodden underfoot, give it time, it will rise up again!" Perhaps when one ceases to be able to love, one is already dead. Well, the funeral was postponed, at all events. . . .

The surge and flurry of the *Gare du Nord*—Gallic dramatisation of the commonplace. Escape at last into the twilit streets in the wake of the porter. Isolation in the jimcrack, rickety cab. Paris. . . .

Moyra sat breathless, holding her lover's arm.

Knowing Moyra's tastes, Gilbert had taken rooms in a small hotel on the left bank, in the rue des Beaux-arts. A dressing-room, with a bed in it, opened out of the larger room. They were

received by the smiling *patronne* as "Monsieur et Madame." The *valet de chambre* preceded them up the winding staircase to the second floor, deposited their baggage and departed, with a smile, closing the door.

Their first embrace, to Gilbert, was unnerving, terrible. He was afraid, stricken with fear. But Moyra's eyes shone with a child's ruthless happiness. She was in uncontrollable high spirits. His love for her was strong enough to prevent him from disturbing her. She had not questioned the arrangement of the rooms; she had not resisted when he had put the wedding-ring on her finger "to save trouble"; she had no place now in her mind for complications or decisions. Gilbert said to himself that they must dine, and look up friends, afterwards, in the familiar cafés, and get very tired and sleepy. Let things be. Let the gods decide. There was time.

CHAPTER XV

"CHLOE!"

"Moyra!"

The two women looked at one another, for some moments, in a thrilling silence. Then Chloe got up from her chair and moved across to Moyra's table. It was a quarter to twelve. Gilbert was in the hotel, writing, and Moyra was waiting in the café of their adoption until he came to take her to luncheon. She had bought the last number of *L'Esprit Nouveau* at Flammarion's, and had spent a blissful half-hour turning its pages, sipping her vermouth-citron, watching the passers-by. This unexpected encounter with Chloe woke her from a pleasant dream.

They plied one another with conventional questions:

"How long have you been here? How long are you staying?"

"We are leaving for Florence in a few days," Moyra observed. "We shall be in Italy about a month." She flushed slightly as she faced Chloe's glance. Out of the corner of her eye she saw the large outline of George Maynard Brown, sitting with a cigar in his mouth before the Continental *Daily Mail*. The British husband. Ugh!

Chloe's eye fell upon her wedding ring. "My darling girl," she exclaimed rapturously. "A honeymoon! I am so glad. Who is he? Do I know him?"

Moyra flushed more deeply.

"It isn't a honeymoon, Chloe," she said. "At least, not in the conventional sense. You know it's quite possible for a man and a woman who are friends to travel together . . . without all that."

Chloe gurgled with laughter at what she considered her friend's *naïveté*. She regarded Moyra as a grown-up person regards a child who has made a comic remark with great seriousness. Moyra, on her side, resented this condescension. She was in arms for her virginity; the virgin defiant. Chloe, she thought, was just one of these commonplace, sensual married women, all dulled and smeared with sex and maternity and domesticity. A cow.

"But you haven't told me who it is," Chloe persisted. (These intimate friends, with their curiosities!) However, Gilbert might arrive now at any moment. She would have to tell.

"It's Gilbert, Chloe. I'm expecting him here."

Moyra looked at Chloe intently. It was not for her to flinch. Some queer instinct made her watch Chloe's face. She noticed a sudden flicker in Chloe's eyes when she mentioned Gilbert's name; and she had grown perceptibly paler.

"My dearest, I'm most frightfully pleased,"

Chloe said at last. The words seemed to cost her an effort. "I always knew you two would get on well together. . . . Don't you remember when you came to tea? But Gilbert platonic! It's too funny." She contrived a peal of unconvincing laughter, while Moyra, stricken to the heart, sat silent. "She is Gilbert's wife," her brain said. "She is his wife, and he is still her real husband. It's all wrong."

Her face grew pale and her heart seemed to die within her breast. She wondered if she were going to faint. And all the time she listened to Chloe's gush of words, and watched her growing nervousness. "You know, we haven't met since, nor written to one another. He and George were very old friends. They were at Oxford together. And Gilbert's frightfully nervy. . . ."

She suddenly turned and beckoned to her husband. George came heavily across to the table, folding his *Daily Mail* and clutching it under his arm.

"Hullo!" he said, catching Moyra's eye. "How are you?" He relapsed into a weighty silence, loaded with British phlegm.

"Look here, George," said Chloe, making an effort to rouse him, "we shall both meet Gilbert in a moment. There he is, I believe." Her eyes had raked the Boul' Mich' anxiously, and in the far distance she had caught sight of a familiar figure in grey tweeds.

"Oh!" said George, and paused. "I see."

He looked inquiringly at Moyra, and observed again, "I see." Beyond a vague resentment against Gilbert for having married his wife before he married her himself, George had absolutely no feeling about his former friend whatever. To the Maynard Brown mind, the "friends" who got in their path mattered no more than the crushed insect matters to the stampeding elephant. He had walked into Gilbert's house and taken Chloe because he wanted a woman, and the unmarried ones would not look at him. Thanks to Gilbert's penury, he had been able to secure Chloe at a bargain price. It was all perfectly satisfactory and "in order." He hadn't the least objection to meeting Gilbert; and as for Chloe, of course it couldn't matter to her either. She was become his property—part of the Maynard Brown estate, on which people laid hands at their peril.

George's phlegm was superb: he was armour-plated and impervious. To Chloe, it was an exasperation. Her own nerves were shattered by it, and she knew quite enough about Gilbert's to imagine, in advance, a "painful scene." Moyra sat, with her bulging blue eyes full of resentment and anger against them both. She felt the beginning of a possessive feeling for Gilbert. These two wretches, they shouldn't hurt him! She wouldn't let them hurt him. They had forfeited the right to that supreme pleasure. For the moment the privilege was hers. And suddenly he disentangled himself from the crowd,

and stood before them—his face wreathed in smiles.

"Well, I'm blessed!" he said.

He and Chloe shook hands with the warmth of old friends. The intimacy of their laughter, which lacerated Moyra's feminine vanity, was lost upon George. He waited heavily until Gilbert turned and offered his hand. In his capacity as the "aggrieved party"—for so, for reasons known only to the Maynard Brown mind, he had elected to regard himself—he paused, perceptibly, before accepting it.

"Have a drink?" George suggested at last, more to fill in a pause than from any hospitable instinct. He did not want to buy Gilbert a drink. He really wanted to get rid of him and the evidently disreputable young woman, Chloe's friend too, with whom he was obviously carrying on a clandestine intrigue. The immorality of these "Bohemians!"

"Have a *Suze-Anis-fine*," said George rather peremptorily, as the waiter came up, flicked his napkin and uttered an interrogatory "M'sieu'?"

"Thanks. It sounds poisonous as well as potent," Gilbert replied. "I will."

The drink, "*genre* Pernod" and stiffly laced with brandy, helped him to keep control of his nerves, to preserve his sense of humour. He began to talk to Chloe about Gilbert junior. Gilbert junior, it appeared, was getting on very well. (He was at the preparatory house of a co-educational

school in Hampshire, the excellent head mistress of which specialised in taking "entire charge" of the unfortunate children of divorced parents.) Gillie, it appeared, had recently contracted whooping cough, was now recovered and had asked tenderly after his daddie.

"We must send him some chocolate bonbons," said Moyra unexpectedly.

What did she mean by that "we," Gilbert wondered. Was she beginning, then, to accept him as her mate—despite her insistence on keeping him at arm's length—or was she merely anxious to annoy Chloe? He knew perfectly well at the back of his mind that the latter explanation was the true one.

The conversation, which had creaked a little at first, now became easy and agreeable. Chloe congratulated him on the huge success of "The Silent Stranger." "I always told you you would pull it off one of these days," she said, "and that when you did your early books would begin selling again." They chatted, the three of them, upon a thousand topics, Paris, the pictures in the Louvre and the Luxembourg, books, the play, Shakespeare and Company, James Joyce and his "Ulysses," Raymond Duncan. . . . Queer how quickly one woman could cure you of another! "Fixation" was the new word, wasn't it? Well, he'd lost his "fixation" on Chloe, lost it absolutely. But much remained. It could not be otherwise after so many years of intimacy, physical and mental.

Up to a point, he knew so well the way her mind worked, knew it as well as he knew every detail of her body. They were still linked to one another in an odd sort of fashion, linked as she and George could never be linked, as he and Moyra could never be linked. There was no sentiment in this reflection, it was rather a realisation, however dim, of the working of some natural law, about which mankind has agreed to forget.

George was getting increasingly bored with their chatter. He wanted his luncheon. He rose and fixed Chloe with hard, Petruchio glance. "I think we'd better be going," he said.

Chloe dropped her sentence in the middle. "Yes, dear," she replied, in submissive accents—the completely dominated woman, sensually thrilling with enjoyment of her domination.

In a few moments the partings were over. Moyra and Gilbert sat on, outside the café, watching the retreating forms of the Maynard Browns. He noticed that Moyra was looking depressed and unhappy—a solemn child, fearful and disturbed. He cursed the ill-luck which had put her in a false position; but he did not understand the reason for her melancholy and she did not try to explain it.

"My dear, we'll go away from this hateful city," he said, after a pause. "We'll go to Italy—to-morrow, to-night, if you like. We can come here again on our way home, if you want to."

"Yes," she said. "Let's go, Gilbert. As soon as possible."

Gilbert found it difficult to rouse her from her mood of depression. But with the years there comes an understanding of food, and of the part which (despite the romantics) it plays even in the highest emotions of which humanity is capable. He called a cab and they drove to Prunier's, and drank with their oysters a bottle of that Pouilly for which the restaurant is justly famous. The wine slowly did its cheering work, and he began to talk to her about their journey, about Florence. One night would be enough to spend in Milan. They would imitate Cook's tourists and cram the Brera, the Palazzo Poldi-Pezzoli, Leonardo's "Last Supper," Sant' Ambrogio, and the Cathedral into a day and a half. Gilbert enlarged upon his detestation of Milan; but there were some pictures there which she could not miss. Perhaps they could stop there, though, on their way home. He was impatient to get to Florence, and infected Moyra with his eagerness.

When they got back to the hotel, Gilbert found long letters from Tobey and from Cleopatra. Tobey was coming to Florence too, with Betty Carson, his latest "case." She was, it appeared, "wonderful." He had never been so smitten before! Her repressions had been released, according to Tobey's usual formula, with the most gratifying results. He hoped that Gilbert was not contemplating matrimony with Moyra. Surely

the educational value of his first attempt had not been wholly lost? . . . Cleopatra was already in Italy with Austin Dodge, the playwright, and probably they would all meet. Dodge was Cleopatra's latest protégé. She intended, he thought, to marry the poor man, in order to give him an interest in life. Apparently, one evening, after dancing with her, he had attempted to gas himself, but had only partially succeeded. There was no holding Cleopatra these days. She had gone back to her grandmother with a vengeance, and had rejuvenated herself in a horrifying manner during the process. Prudence had grown now into a most abandoned young person, and had been acting as secretary to an amorous "wee free" politician, while Iseult had taken to posing before any old gentleman who would buy her a dinner. Altogether it was just as well that Belsize Towers was shut up and deserted by its former inmates, seeing that its old ideals were all forgotten.

Cleopatra's long outburst was written in violet ink on stone-coloured stationery adorned with a large monogram embossed in gold. In it she explained her reasons for closing Belsize Towers. "You can't run a liberty hall without a licence, and licence is a thing which, after what I've seen of it, I don't hold with. There's a lot that's bad about marriage, but on the whole, in my opinion it's better than no marriage. So I hope, Bunny, you won't just take this young girl you're with

up the garden and leave her there. Now that you are earning good money and have a little capital behind you, you can make a nice home for her; and have some little loves of children to be a joy to you in your old age. Think how much nicer that would be than living like Tobey!" There was a great deal more in this vein. Gilbert read the letter aloud.

They were sitting on the big bed in Moyra's room, half-dressed, comfortable. The girl's head was reposing on the curve of Gilbert's arm. The barrier between them seemed to have bred a new strange tenderness. They were lovers and not lovers. Something more: something less.

"My dear," said Moyra, when Gilbert had finished Cleopatra's letter, "don't you *see* I can't marry you? I can't be your mistress either. I hate all that side of life. And I don't want to have a child. I couldn't bear the pain. I'm not a woman of that type. And I have my profession to think of. It's as important to me as expression is to you. It's my form of expression. . . . It's no good, dear. I can't help myself, or change myself. It's hard for you, I know. But I have a horror of . . . all that. It disgusts me. I can't explain it to you. Perhaps I don't understand it myself."

With an impulsive gesture she threw her bare warm arm across his breast, and laid her cheek against his cheek. . . .

Gilbert felt as if a hand of ice had been laid upon his heart, and when her lips sought his and she held him in a tender but completely passionless embrace, despair came upon him . . . despair and fear.

CHAPTER XVI

At all costs, he must not spoil her holiday. This had been a wretched day. First that unlucky meeting with Chloe and George Maynard Brown, and now this tormenting discussion about marriage. He could see that it was her friendship for him, her anxiety not to hurt him which, by forcing a conflict with her own nature, or with what she believed to be her own nature, was making her so unhappy. The only thing to be done was to leave this dreary Paris straightaway and trust to the healing Italian sunshine to charm away their *malise.*

Moyra fell in eagerly with his suggestion that they should travel that night, and by good fortune they found two berths left in the sleeping car. The humours of the journey to Milan were a relief to both of them. Most of the other berths were reserved by a firm of English tourist agents for their "select, first-class autumn tour, for ladies and gentlemen only, to the historic cities of sunny Italy, personally conducted throughout." The personal conductor, a sandy-haired young man with an extremely nervous and emotional manner, evidently unused to his job and with some ap-

parent distaste for it, rushed wildly from one end of the corridor of the sleeping-car carriage to the other.

Heads appeared at the doors of compartments, and questions popped at him as he ran. "Will our luggage be all right, Mr. Burns?" "What time do we get to Milan?" "Can you tell me the name of our hotel?" The heads were of all descriptions and sexes. There were clerical heads, and spinsterish heads, and heads of festive old bounders, and heads of extemporary captains, heads of gay young things, and heads like horses. Mr. Burns winced at every question, and grew more and more distraught. He had a piece of paper in his hand, evidently containing a list of his flock. Whenever he answered a question, he tried breathlessly to identify the questioner. "Excuse me, are you Mrs. Firkins? Are you Captain Tupp? Are you Mr. Horsefall?" The clergyman denied indignantly that he was Captain Tupp; Captain Tupp was equally emphatic that he was not Mr. Horsefall.

Moyra and Gilbert stepped down on the platform in order to get a better view of these strange proceedings. "I'm sure I've got one of them in with me," Moyra said. "I never saw anyone quite like it before."

"There *is* no one quite like them," Gilbert replied. "They are unique. Where they go to when they get back to England, it's impossible to imagine. Perhaps the provinces shelter them.

Marvellous thought: but I shan't go to Wigan to see."

"Mine's from Bootle," Moyra observed. "She has a large flask of brandy, too, and she gave me some out of a little cup."

By this time Mr. Burns was in a state of frenzy. "Where is Mrs. Valentine?" he cried in heart-rending accents. "Has anyone seen her?" But nobody had seen Mrs. Valentine. None of the select ladies and gentlemen had ever experienced Mrs. Valentine in all their lives.

With a cry like a wounded animal, Mr. Burns precipitated himself through the carriage door and fled along the platform. It was but ten minutes before the train was due to start. Gilbert and Moyra waited in thrilled expectancy.

"What's the betting he doesn't get her?" said Gilbert. "I'll lay you ten francs he is left behind."

Moyra took his bet. The minutes slowly ticked away. Meanwhile some of Mr. Burns' agitation had communicated itself to his party. "*Where* is our conductor?" asked, in ominous accents, a lady with a large grey face, lorgnettes and expensive furs. She was a formidable lady.

"*En voiture, en voiture!*" cried the guard. The platform began to empty.

"I say, it's too bad!" said Captain Tupp to the Reverend Mr. Horsefall. "That fellow's got all our tickets on him, that conductor chap. And the

train's just off. It's due to start in ninety seconds."

"Good heavens!" cried the formidable lady. "All lost! Our tickets, everything! It is monstrous, monstrous! I shall wire to his employers. Fancy sending out a man like that to conduct a party!"

At this point all the heads emerged, together with the forms belonging to them. The corridor was crowded with anxious faces. The train was now on the point of starting, and Gilbert and Moyra had become infected with the general consternation. "Poor wretch," said Moyra. "It's all up now. You've won your ten francs all right."

But no. At the very last instant minute there appeared at the far end of the platform a distraught man who seized by the arm a small, agitated and rather plump lady. How they ran! The lady's little bag was dropped, fell open, was picked up. And again they ran. They grew nearer. Slowly the train began to move. "Jump in!" shouted the terrorised flock to their wandering shepherd. "Jump in, man!" But the shepherd had not forgotten his duty. Mrs. Valentine must be got on board first, tickets or no tickets. Panting and purple, the unfortunate woman was half pushed, half dragged up the steps of the carriage, Mr. Burns following her head-first into the corridor.

For some minutes everyone was deprived of speech. Moyra's friend from Bootle produced her

brandy and her little cup and endeavoured to restore the fainting Mrs. Valentine. Mr. Burns gasped in an agony compounded of physical discomfort, terror, and professional shame. But at last he pulled himself together and did his best to soothe down his perturbed clients. Mrs. Valentine, thanks perhaps to the brandy or to a temperamental incapacity to remember anything for long, was the quickest to chirp up. "I just thought I'd go and look at some of the shops outside the station," she explained. "And then I suppose I got lost. It *was* clever of Mr. Burns to find me, wasn't it?" She smiled archly at the young man, who, grateful at that moment for a kind word even from an imbecile, became quite flustered with pleasure. But the recognition of his cleverness was confined to the lady who had experienced it. Captain Tupp snorted, and Mr. Horsefall looked towards heaven and made noises in his throat. The formidable lady, Mrs. Masters, observed icily: "It wouldn't have been very clever if he had left us to travel to Milan without our tickets." Apparently somewhere in Mr. Burns' make-up was a sense of humour. Captain Tupp's snorts had made him blench, but Mrs. Masters' asperity gave him an attack of violent giggles which he was observed by Gilbert to be making a gigantic effort to control.

Gilbert liked the look of Mr. Burns. An hour or two later, when Moyra had gone to bed, he walked down the train and finding the conductor in

an empty first-class smoking carriage, he walked in. He had that sudden hunger for contact with his own sex which so many men experience when they travel with a woman, however deeply loved she may be.

"Rather a tiresome job, yours, I should think," Gilbert observed.

Mr. Burns smiled.

"But it takes me to Italy," he said. There was a light in his eye with which Gilbert immediately sympathised. "And the people interest me," he went on, "when I am not being bothered with them. They're all so queer, and different, and improbable. This sort of business makes me understand why reviewers of novels, when they meet characters in books who are not like themselves, so often get pent up about it. What horrible and disgusting types! How absolutely unlike life! How absurdly exaggerated! As if people ever behaved like that — and so forth. My party is far more incredible to me than the characters in any novel I ever read. I can scarcely believe they're really true, even now."

"I suppose we English tend to divide up into smallish groups," said Gilbert, "and unless something happens, like a war or the accidents and chances of foreign travel, to mix us up, we go through our lives in blank ignorance of what all the other groups are like, except our own."

"Have you ever looked," Mr. Burns said reflectively, "at the funny places on the map of

England that you've never been to and never intend to go to, and wondered what on earth the people were like who lived in them? I have. I used at one time to think we were all much the same, and that the only differences were the usual differences of class and education and accent. We are not. There are people in my crowd who come from places like Middlesborough, who bear no more resemblance to Londoners or south country Englishmen than Esquimaux do. And I've some still more fantastic humans, who come from Potton, wherever Potton is. They are strange, very strange. They take Potton with them wherever they go, talk Potton, think Potton. One never could have inmagined that so many events of such epoch-making importance could conceivably have happened at Potton. Why, the chronicles of Potton were poured into my ear even in the Louvre, when I was trying to look at the Giorgione. For days I've lived in Potton, at second-hand. And Potton will be taken to Florence, to Rome, to Venice, to Naples. Whispers from Potton will come to me upon the Grand Canal. Potton will blend with the savage Roman sunset, when I watch it once again from Trinità dei Monti; it will enter the Blue Grotto at Capri; blend itself with the melancholy plash of fountains in the gardens of the Villa d'Este. Thank the Lord, I shall be able to escape fairly often, though. The Italian guides do most of the actual conducting, once we get started. . . ."

Mr. Burns lit another of his innumerable gaspers — he seemed to be a chain smoker, and his nerves were obviously in rags — and Gilbert left him, as Lockitt leaves McHeath, to his "private meditations." They were to be assisted, it seemed, by the Loeb Petronius, one of J. S. Fletcher's detective stories, a tattered copy of Aleister Crowley's book of sonnets, "Clouds without Water," and Paul Morand's "Ouvert la Nuit." A bottle of red wine lay shamelessly in the rack above his head, resting upon the tickets of his party and a bundle of receipted bills. Mr. Burns, Gilbert guessed, was quite as much a surprise to the inhabitants of Potton as they were to him.

As he made his way back to his berth, he overheard a fragment of conversation from an open door. The ladies inside, plump Cockneys, were having a friendly gossip before going to bed. . . .

"There she was," said one of them, "at ten in the morning, sitting at the piano *in 'er noode!*"

"She must have been mad, dear," the other replied.

"Oh, no, she wasn't, dear. She was strainge, I grant yew, but not mad."

"Strainge, I grant yew!" Gilbert went off to bed, chuckling. The whole adventure of life was the strangest thing imaginable. The only two classes of people who could ever know anything *for certain* were the true believers and the indubitably mad!

CHAPTER XVII

MILAN was the usual disappointment. The hard, bright, noisy northern city was, too clearly, not the Italy of which Moyra had so often dreamed. They spent a morning at the Brera, looking at the Crivellis, the Bellinis, and the Mantegnas; they lunched at Biffi's in the vast windy Galleria; they wandered in and out of the beautiful unreal Cathedral. They drove out to Sant' Ambrogio, that sun-baked Byzantine marvel of delicious brick, saw the Leonardo on their way home, and then explored the treasures in the Palazzo Poldi-Pezzoli and sniffed the aroma of Second Empire Connoisseur exhaled by that peculiarly human house. They were tiring days, but Mr. Burns and his select party provided plenty of comic relief. Gilbert had insisted on going to the same hotel as Mr. Burns, to whom he was beginning to become attached. The sight of Mr. Burns "functioning" was a thing not to be missed. Trembling in every limb, sweating, occasionally gesticulating, talking torrentially in his ungrammatical French to Concierge and Manager and Head Waiter, the conductor ran from end to end of the hotel lounge like a rat in a cage pursued

by an army of terriers. The ladies and gentlemen of his select party, knowing that they had him at their mercy, could not leave him alone. Their nerves were in rags after their long journey from Paris, but so, of course, were Burns'. The Reverend Horsefall (secretly addicted to an abdominal belt) had been made to share a room with Captain Tupp. No one knew what physical dark secret it was which the gallant Captain wished to keep hidden, but his anger at not having a room to himself was no less vehement than the clergyman's. The redoubtable Mrs. Masters had been put in a room overlooking the street. The tramcars would be certain to keep her awake! The noise would kill her! It was *monstrous!* Her room must be changed immediately. "But the hotel is absolutely full," murmured Mr. Burns. "Then I shall write to your employers," Mrs. Masters snapped. Her eyes gleamed balefully.

And then, to crown everything, to put the *comble* on the conductor's misery, Mrs. Valentine once more had got lost. Nobody had set eyes on her for hours and hours. She missed her luncheon, she missed Mr. Burns' personally conducted excursion to the world-famous Cathedral. Milan had engulfed her.

Moyra and Gilbert encountered the distracted Burns in the midst of his troubles. His mobile face, which expressed every shadow of emotion in the plainest terms, now expressed a longing for their help and companionship which was not to

be resisted. "Oh, my God," he gasped. Then he sank into a chair and roared with laughter. "I wish I could cut and run," he said. "Fancy being in Italy and tied by the leg to a menagerie like this! I've a good mind to leave them their passports with the concierge, and enough money, and let them fend for themselves."

Moyra and Gilbert comforted and encouraged him as best they could, and he gradually recovered his composure. "Come on," said Moyra. "We'll find your Mrs. Valentine for you."

"She's either in the Cathedral or strolling round the Piazza," Gilbert remarked. "They always are." He took Burns' arm and helped him to his feet, and the three of them set out in pursuit of the lost sheep. When they got into the Galleria, Gilbert suggested a drink. They sat outside Biffi's and watched the crowd. "If we sit here long enough she's sure to turn up," said Gilbert, tempting. He liked Burns' boyish smile, his naughtiness, his "truant" quality. Though he scarcely realised it, he was clutching at Burns to save his own sanity. He wished that Moyra would go, and for once in a way his wishes coincided with her own. "I think I'll go back to the hotel to do some reading," she said. "I hope you'll find her, Mr. Burns." Mr. Burns received the impact of Moyra's charm, then glanced enviously at Gilbert, then — since he was observant — sympathetically. Gilbert was "going through it," he noticed, and he himself had been "going

through it" — though in a different way — for over a year. He recognised the symptoms.

The pleasant, rather operatic uniforms, the dramatic cloaks, cocked hats and waving feathers which help to decorate the Italian scene, made points of interest in the black-coated crowd which sauntered up and down under the high glass roof. It was fun to sit, with a pink drink in front of you, withdrawn like this, watching. Their thoughts were communicated without speech — the telepathy of everyday life which is too common to attract attention. "What we all want," said Gilbert at last, "is a nice, comfortable, bomb-proof dug-out. Somewhere where we can be safe from people and passions. Or where we can get some help in making ourselves safe from them."

"I used to think I enjoyed a good bit of misery," Burns remarked, puffing meditatively at his inevitable Macedonia cigarette. "It kept one alive, kept one violent, kept the fat off one's soul — so I used to argue. Now, I'm not sure. What's that that Blake says about "abstinence throws sand all over, the ruddy limbs and flaming hair, but Desire gratified plants seeds of life and beauty there?" There's probably something in that. There usually is in Mr. Blake's observations, I notice. You know, I believe unhappiness is in a way a line of least resistance. A really good first-class joy is a thing that many people over thirty would shrink from, in terror, because it might come to an end. The young things who

would jump at it wouldn't appreciate it till it was over. They never do. With misery, on the other hand, one is fairly safe. It has a certain motive force in it for the creative artist: and you know that when things can't get very much worse, the chances are that they will get better. Love torments, with me, have a time limit: three years. I know from bitter experiences that it's only a case of sticking it out."

"And to be loved, one has only to be completely indifferent" Gilbert broke in, irrelevantly. "It's all so absurd and, in an odd sort of a way undignified. One ought to be 'indifferent' all the time — self-contained. It's only a question of exercising proper control over the ridiculous appetites which nature has planted in us. . . ."

"Only!" said Burns, and whistled.

Gilbert laughed. "Don't imagine I live up to my principles, my dear boy. I wish I did. I believe firmly in complete non-morality in everything relating to the physical side of sex, I believe in friendship — the 'beyond he and she' — and yet by instinct I am the conventional possessive male, yearning for children, a settled home, family life and all the rest of it. Can't get my middle-class British respectability out of my system."

"What a fearful thing!" said Burns. "Have another *Americano?* It'll do you good." Burns' fits of giggles were infectious. Their drinks were brought, and they began to look at the crowd once

more. Night was upon them now. The roof of the Gallery had grown dark purple blue, and the lights of the shops and cafés shone out in two long glittering lines. They looked without much interest at the ceaseless procession of prostitutes, who all turned their heads as they passed Biffi's and raked the tables for potential clients. "They cost half as much as a genuine clergyman's daughter from Tooting and give you twice the pleasure, I believe," said Burns. "And yet it can't be done, somehow. It isn't we who are the coarse sex. There isn't a woman born who is so physically fastidious, so easily put off and disgusted as the average civilised man."

"Isn't it rather that they have a different conception of what is disgusting?" Gilbert asked.

Burns admitted it. "But ours is the right one," he added. Gilbert thanked him in his heart for that touch of masculine swank. Their friendship had been growing during this desultory conversation, as friendships do grow, unperceived and apparently without cause. Gilbert was conscious of a sudden desire to go away with Burns, to run away with him, to Rome or to Florence. It was on the tip of his tongue — for a joke — to put his caprice into words when his companion leapt to his feet, knocked his chair over and shouted "There she is!"

Gilbert saw a small, plump, perfectly placid, middle-aged woman wandering slowly towards them. A childish, quite vacant smile was spread

over her face: she looked perfectly happy. Burns had become transformed at the sight of her: a professional man again. "There you are, at last, Mrs. Valentine," he cried. "We've been looking for you everywhere." Burns was functioning.

CHAPTER XVIII

ARRIVED at Florence, Gilbert and Moyra took rooms in a gloomy hotel near the Piazza della Signoria and gave themselves up frankly to sight-seeing. For a week they were caught out of themselves, forgetful of everything save the unimaginable beauty stored and treasured in this flower of cities. The spell would probably have remained longer upon them both had they not, upon a sunny morning, encountered Cleopatra and her entire escort outside the offices of Thomas Cook and Son in the Via Tornabuoni. Cleopatra descended upon them like an avalanche. "My darling chickabiddies," she cried, "how happy you both look!" She kissed Moyra with resounding emphasis, without waiting for an introduction, while Austin Dodge watched, impassively, twisting his monocle. Tobey and Betty Carson were less effusive. Tobey, indeed, seemed rather bored. When Cleopatra had finished saying how d'you do and had paused in her recital of all her adventures during the past few months, Tobey interposed plaintively to say that he wanted his luncheon. "Come on, all of you," said Cleopatra, who had lost none of her hospitable instincts since the

closing of Belsize Towers, "we'll have lunch at the palace. Stop some cabs, Tobey." Some cabs were stopped, and the party fitted in to them. Cleopatra called the furnished villa which she had taken on the outskirts of Florence, about a mile beyond the Ponte Rosso, "the Palace," in the naïve belief that Palazzo was the generic name for any Florentine house. But if the Villa Flora could not be described as a palace, it had everything else to recommend it. Set in an enchanting garden walled in by ilex trees, the old yellow house with its broad loggias met its incoming tenants with an air of mild surprise. It seemed politely to raise its eyebrows at them. The management of the place, which would have been quite outside Cleopatra's capacities, had been taken over by Austin Dodge, who spoke Italian fairly fluently, having lived for a year or two in Italy in the days of his prosperity. He it was who superintended the Italian servants, ordered the meals and paid the bills. Since Cleopatra insisted, in her lavish way, in asking every casual acquaintance encountered in a morning walk to come to see her, Mr. Dodge's duties as major-domo were by no means light. It was impossible to tell whether ten or twenty people would be lunching or dining at the Villa—Cleopatra never remembered her invitations until the guests arrived—and food must be provided for all who chose to turn up. This morning the crowd of *convives* was unusually large. Guests were strolling about the Villa gardens, and others

were smoking cigars in the hall. Of these, the first to attract Gilbert's notice was, of all people in the world, Louis Mathers. Those insolent shoulders were unmistakable; and no one but Mathers would present to his hostess a back view of which a large rent in the seat of his trousers was the most conspicuous ornament. Having made his effect, Mathers turned sharply from the paper he was examining and strode towards Cleopatra as if he intended to sweep her up into his arms and convey her into her own garden for an ecstatic embrace. He surged towards her, caught her hand in his and bent tenderly over it. Cleopatra was visibly moved as she expressed her delight at seeing him. A small, thin-lipped man, with smooth dark hair and dark eyes under lashes of a blackness which accentuated the pallor of his skin, was the next to greet his hostess, when Mathers had introduced him. His name was Aubrey Sutton. Then two girls came in from the garden, one of them—Mabel Watson—red-haired and freckled, with jeering blue eyes and an expression half priggish and half truculent, the other a long-legged child of sixteen or seventeen, with bobbed brown hair and wide-open roguish eyes accustomed to see the absurdity of a world formed expressly for her enjoyment. She was dressed in a plain frock of gentian blue and wore a Panama hat trimmed with a thin ribbon of the same colour as her frock. Her name was Margery Vincent. "Hullo," she cried. "We're awfully glad you've come, Mrs. Leigh-

Perins. Mabel and I were fighting like cats, through sheer hunger."

"Come right along in, children," said Cleopatra. "I brought Moyra Burden and Gilbert Vayle along too. This is them"—she smiled and waved a massive arm. "So now you know one another!"

They surged into the large dining-room where the *hors d'œuvres*—red tomatoes, pale sliced cucumber, fish salads, beetroot—made pleasant spots of colour on the table, and sat down amid a buzz of conversation. Gilbert sat opposite Moyra, who was next to Mabel Watson, and on his right was Margery Vincent. Tobey and his Betty were lower down.

"I do wish Mother were here," said Margery to Gilbert. "She couldn't come because she's gone to Lucca to see something, and left me with Mabel. Mabel is supposed to look after me, but really it's the other way round. I have to threaten her with Mother's disapproval or else she'd stay out in the cafés all night talking about art. I can't talk about art, can you?"

Gilbert secretly rather thought he could, when adequately in liquor, but he hastened to deny the suggestion. "You'd like Mother," Margery continued, "she's so frightfully amusing. Sometimes we are taken for sisters. Of course, she's only my stepmother really, you know. She loves a rag. Do you know who that old man is with the long pointed nose and the wicked grey hair?"

Louis Mathers, at this moment, cast in Gilbert's

direction a glance that was almost a wink. Then he heaved his shoulders and swooped down again, conversationally, upon his hostess. Cleopatra was reduced by the impact into girlish giggles, and Gilbert watched Louis refilling her glass with the admirable Montepulciano which Dodge had ordered, and wondered what would happen. A faint purple tinge was already beginning to mount to Cleopatra's cheek-bones. "Oh, yes," said Gilbert, "he's an old friend of mine. That is Mr. Louis Mathers, the poet. He spends most of the year in Italy now, but the last time I met him was in London."

"Oh, *that's* Mr. Mathers, is it?" said Margery, with awakened interest. "Mother doesn't like him and wouldn't introduce him the other day. But I think he's rather attractive. I like old men. They know such a lot. We spent the summer in Bavaria," she went on, inconsequently. "Do you know Bavaria? Mummy likes the people because they are artists, and I like them because my real mother was a Bavarian. They dance and sing and drink and paint funny pictures on their houses. There's a lake where we go to, and when you've bathed in it you can lie out in the sun and look up at the mountains. We've got a châlêt just by the lake side. We're going there again next summer. But I shan't stay there, of course. You see, I'm a Wandervögel." This last was announced with extraordinary pride.

"Whatever is a Wandervögel?" Gilbert asked.

"Well, you see, in Germany they're all rather fed up with their fathers and mothers and with all the bad ideas that led to the war and to all the misery and rottenness that are about everywhere at present. They want to get right back to the old Germany, the Germany of the Meistersingers, the beautiful Germany of the old legends and traditions. And so everywhere there are societies of boys and of girls, and sometimes mixed ones of boys and girls together. They are what you might call blood brotherhoods. You wouldn't understand, I expect, because you are pre-war."

"Good Lord!" said Gilbert, thoughtfully, "so I am."

"Mummy's pre-war too, but she *does* understand, a bit. The Wandervögels I belong to are half boys and half girls. Our leader is a girl, Hilde Ebenhocht. Oh, she's so lovely! We'd any of us do anything for her, and her orders are carried out implicitly."

"And what do you do?" Gilbert asked, with growing interest.

"We go out together and walk for weeks through the woods and over the mountains. We sleep in the open or in a *hütte* or *Gasthaus*, and we sing and dance and talk and bathe. Hans, who is my friend, is very, very serious. He was a Communist once, but he isn't now. He's gone to the other extreme. He thinks the break-up of European civilisation is inevitable, and that the only thing to do is to face it philosophically. He

sings beautifully, and won't drink or smoke like other German boys. I am sure he will be a poet."

"And how old is he?" Gilbert asked.

"Hans is nearly eighteen. He was a boy of ten when the war broke out, and his parents nearly died in trying to keep him properly fed—the Hunger Blockade, you know. But since the war stopped and he has started being a Wandervögel he has got awfully fit and strong. He's hard as nails now and can walk for miles and miles without getting tired, and he's a wonderful climber, too."

Gilbert was conscious of a vague hunger for a country of song and dance, of mountains, sunshine, lakes and woods, where youth was very, very serious and was—youth. He looked across at Moyra who, with flushed face and passionate enthusiasm, was talking art to Mabel. Mabel's enthusiasm was no less strident. They hurled great names at one another. "Is it *really* a Giorgione?" asked Moyra, referring to that famous picture "The Concert" in the Pitti Palace. "After all, there's only Berenson's authority for the attribution." Mabel seemed to understand Mr. Berenson's reasons better than the famous critic could possibly have understood them himself. She expounded. She said, "Ah, but did you notice"; and "Yes, but when you *compare*." They were so busy playing the game of rival erudition that they scarcely had time to eat or drink. When Cleopatra rose, rather flushed

and unsteady from her seat, they were still deeply occupied in displaying to one another the choicest wares in their respective shop windows. "What a fool I am!" thought Gilbert to himself, "what a fool I am!" He would have given much, just then, for Chloe's understanding laugh. The laugh was against him, not against Moyra. After all, she had a perfect right to be herself, and it was just as unfortunate for her to find herself in a false position as it was for him to discover in her the school-marm preordained. Moyra showed no anxiety whatever to leave Cleopatra's hospitable roof, and the friendship which she had struck up with Mabel Watson seemed to be instantaneous and violent. Gilbert was not precisely jealous, though jealousy entered into his feeling of being completely baffled, frustrated. He liked the things Moyra liked, but in a completely different way: his sense of proportion was not, could never be hers. Again, there came over him a surge of irritation. Why was he wasting his time and emotional energy over a girl who had nothing to give him in return? The charm of the unattainable was over-rated. He knew that for him "only fulfilment will do, complete fulfilment here in the flesh." And so he began to withdraw and detach himself. From Tobey also he detached himself, and from Cleopatra: from the whole crowd of them. And when he had completely detached himself, found himself secret and buried and out of sight behind his own unusually vivacious con-

versation, he felt happier. They all thought he was there. Ah, but he wasn't, though. He wasn't there at all. His intimates had become strangers. He had crossed into his stronghold, and the drawbridge had been pulled up with a clang, so that none could follow him.

In the cool, artificial twilight of the great loggia he reclined at full length on a garden chair and listened to the talk which flowed all round him. Tobey's enthusiastic "Oooh" came at intervals from a far corner where he was talking contraceptives to a large, bright, hard American woman who pranced about Europe preaching rational and hygienic love. Miss Kate Crocker of New York City had "blown in" after luncheon in order to work off some of her surplus activity. Unless she used the words "sublimate," "libido," "Wasserman test," "homosexual," "heterosexual," "orgasm," and "birth control," so many times in every hour she became irritable and discontented, like a dipsomaniac when the pubs are closed. In Tobey she had found a sympathetic, indeed, an enthusiastic, listener. The echoes of the conversation which came to Gilbert's ears made him feel faintly sick. They discussed love as enraptured hypochrondriacs might discuss dyspepsia, constipation, uric acid and all the other similar topics with which idle and empty people while away the *mauvais quart d'heure* before death. Louis Mathers, Dodge and Aubrey Sutton were talking rather witty scandal about the English

colony in Florence. They were grouped round the vast, immobile figure of Cleopatra as beggars might group themselves in the sunshine on the pedestal of a statue. Gilbert wondered if Louis would forget himself and strike a match on her. Away in the garden, among the olives and the ilexes, Moyra and Mabel Watson were talking Art. And now and then he could see, flitting about by herself among the trees and shrubs, the gay little figure of the Wandervögel in her gentian blue frock. She was beautiful to watch, and her youth and brightness made everyone else seem stuffy, jaded and used up, by contrast. . . .

Suddenly the figure of Cleopatra became animate once more. She took three breaths of a prodigious depth; her great bosom rose and fell under its covering of purple silk; her eyes opened; she sighed deeply; she took notice; she spoke. "It's a nice afternoon," she said. "I'm going into the garden." A look of consternation came over Louis Mathers' face: but his repose was not in danger. Cleopatra liked giving him food, and would have enjoyed sewing up his trousers, but otherwise she was not interested in him. Her eye roved over her guests. She looked at Tobey and at Kate Crocker, and snorted. She gazed out into the garden where Moyra and Mabel Watson were deep in their discussions, and then, with puzzled eyes, she looked at Gilbert. "Come along, Gilbert," she exclaimed, "and help me get an appetite for dinner."

When they reached the garden, Cleopatra took his arm. "You must come and see my fountain," she urged. "It's one of the best in Florence, so Austin says." The fountain was at the end of a long, shaded moss-grown path—a marvel of decayed baroque. Water gushed from a gigantic bearded mouth into a round shallow basin where stone dolphins lashed their tails in a turmoil of green water, surrounding a Venus rising from a mimic sea. The place was infinitely cool, shut in by trees—green and silent, save for a soothing plash and murmur. "I like to come here when I've got the hump," said Cleopatra, expressing in her homely way the kind of emotion which carries a poet through a volume of sonnets. "I don't understand the art of it like Austin, but I like it all the same," she added. There was a wooden bench facing the fountain, placed there by Cleopatra's orders, and here they sat and talked. "I've bin very happy with my money on the whole," said Cleopatra, thoughtfully. "I shouldn't know how to spend it if I hadn't a man to help me. It's Austin that's given me this. His brains and knowledge had a lot more to do with it really than my cheques. Left to myself, I'd have a stuffy big house in a suburb, a thieving chauffeur, perpetual indigestion and a swarm of little dogs. Now look at me—here in this lovely place, with a crowd of young things all round me to keep me cheerful. I've had luck, Gilbert, and that's a fact."

"You old dear!" said Gilbert, linking his arm in hers. "You old dear!"

"And now tell me all about it," said Cleopatra. "I don't know much of what you'd call knowledge, but I know something about life, and I can see you are not as happy as I want you to be. She's not your type, you know, Gilbert, if I may say so, charming and pretty as she is. . . ." Cleopatra, from her fleshly eminence, gazed down at Gilbert with the wise smile of a mother confessor.

"No, I'm afraid I'm not built for a platonic love affair," Gilbert replied. "And Moyra, bless her heart, is a woman's woman, not a man's. She's made that way. It can't be helped. I suppose we are both of us lucky to have found it out in time. We might have tied ourselves up, and got to hate one another—destroyed one another."

"It's a difficult job, dearie, to get over things—but no one can make anything good out of their lives if they don't. These novels with their glorification of fools who live on unrequited love, simply make me sick. Self-respect lies in taking your drink of disappointment like a man and in not making faces over it. But when you *do* find a nice woman of your own kind who really cares for you, remember that all the real romance in life lies in making the best of your partner. If only all these silly young women would understand that when passion wears out it's then, and not before, that the real thing starts! Oh, yes, I know

that every man and every woman has an ideal mate, and it stands to reason it can't ever be the one they are married to. It wouldn't be "ideal" if it were. We all have to have our dreams. We need them to help us over the difficult moments. But the art of life, my dear, is making the best of what the Fates have sent us in the way of a partner. I know. I know what sort of man a woman can live with and *even get to like*, if she tries hard enough. And I know what women can do with the men they marry. You men are our material, Gilbert. We make sons and we make husbands—or mar them. But the average wife nowadays will turn a decent, hard-working and successful man into an ill-conditioned failure, and then leave him for a new grand passion, with the applause of all the feminists to back her. It's all wrong, Gilbert. I just hate this new-fangled nonsense about marriage being hell, and women being slaves and all that. Of course, it's hell: and I'll tell you for why. It's hell because of three things, which are common to both sexes—selfishness, ill-temper, and bad manners. They're all curable; but the divorce court won't cure them, and it never has and never will. It's this 'passion' talk that does the harm. What young people call passion for the most part is just an appetite. A chemical process, somebody called it. It ain't love, though it can be the highest way of expressing love. Love's a thing that grows slowly and

has roots and can stand wind and weather. I believe to make a success of your love life is just about as difficult as to make a success of your art. In both you have to put in a deal of collar-work to get your good moments. But it's the best thing there is, anyway, although it stands to reason that you has to pay the biggest price for it. There's no getting something for nothing in this world, Gilbert. And often one pays heavily and gets only an 'eartache in return. That's what you'll do if you don't take a pull at yourself and realise that you and this little Irish school-marm have both of you made a bloomer. If she hadn't got new-fangled notions about emancipation she wouldn't be here with you now. And see what a lot of trouble you'd both be saved! The old-fashioned way is the best, Gilbert. When I was young, when a girl gave her lips to the man who loved her, she gave everything. He knew where he was then, and so did she."

Cleopatra's "record" came abruptly to an end, and Gilbert didn't feel capable of winding her up again. It had been an unusually long record, even for her, but bits of it stuck in his mind, and he was grateful to her for helping him to clarify his own thoughts. For some minutes they sat in silence, listening to the plash and rumble of the waters, looking at the battered and coquettish Venus surrounded by her dolphins. Cleopatra seemed to be lost in contemplation—perhaps of her own past, perhaps of her future. For she

undoubtedly had a future. Mathers had whispered to him that she and Austin Dodge were going to be married in a fortnight. It had seemed a grotesque joke at the time, but somehow it did not seem quite so ridiculous now. After all, this gross, vulgar, unselfish old dear understood men. She knew their habits, their weaknesses. Cleopatra's secret was that she gave, gave all the time. She "did things," did the prodigiously important minute things of which men have decided to think themselves incapable. She looked after clothes. She had money. Gilbert knew that she would be "upset" if Dodge got drunk, but that she would smile her pleased hospitable barmaid's smile whenever he drank enough to "feel happy in his inside." That was it. She did not grudge her man any "happy feeling." She was generous. And in her funny way, he guessed that she would contrive to give back to her brilliant, rather pathetic protégé the success which once had been his. Gilbert could see her bearing up like some courageous cart-horse, under the yoke. She deserved to be happy because she had seen what most people were too blind to see—the decent side of Austin Dodge's character. Gilbert did not like Dodge, but he was convinced that he would do the decent thing by Cleopatra. Bless her funny old heart—she knew what she was talking about. She had found romance!

Cleopatra awoke from her reverie, put her large hand on Gilbert's knee and smiled down at

him. "Come along, old dumps," she said. "Let's go back to the palace and have our tea. . . . And mind you give that little girl of yours the chance to give you the sack. Remember she's made just as big a fool of herself as she has of you. Part friends, my dear."

Gilbert kissed her large capable hand. "You're a wise old thing," he said. "I can see that I shall have to adopt you."

"As a grandmother," suggested Cleopatra. "Well, I'll make a good one, dearie, even if me English ain't quite what it ought to be!"

While they were walking back down the green shaded pathway to the Villa, Gilbert felt suddenly as if an enormous weight had been lifted from his shoulders. His heart leapt; he was flooded with a queer unexpected sensation of happiness. Could it be true? Was he really free again, his own man, himself? He stretched out both his arms and laughed.

Margery Vincent, the Wandervögel, came bounding towards them up the pathway. "We are all just dying for our teas," she cried, "and do look at this. Isn't it splendid?" She thrust a telegram into Cleopatra's hand.

"Anna has just brought it round from the pension," she explained.

While Cleopatra unfolded the telegram, Margery told Gilbert that it was to say that her Mother was coming back to Florence in two days' time. "Well, that's a mercy!" Cleopatra exclaimed.

"You'll be able to meet her," she added, looking at Gilbert. With his eyes on her stepdaughter, Gilbert felt that the meeting would be pleasant. He found himself looking forward to it.

CHAPTER XIX

When, an hour later, Gilbert suggested to Moyra that they should go back to their hotel, he found that she had invited Mabel Watson and Margery Vincent to dine with them. "You don't mind, Gilbert, do you?" she said. "Mabel Watson is an awfully interesting person, and you and Margery have made friends already. I saw you at lunch."

Gilbert did not mind. What he really would have liked to do was to dine alone with Louis Mathers or with Tobey. He longed to escape the feminine atmosphere. Three women to one man was not fair. But after all, what did it matter? They took a cab from the Ponte Rosso and drove to the Hotel Mazzini, to rest before dinner. Mabel and Margery Vincent were to join them at a small *trattoria* called the Nuova Toscana at half-past seven. As they rattled along Gilbert revolved in his head what he should say to Moyra. The whole thing was so absurd, so fantastic, so humiliating, for both of them. What did she expect him to do about it? What was her solution? His new found freedom and detachment had restored to him his affection for her and put him once more—but in a wholly different way—under the spell of her

Irish charm. She looked curiously boyish as she sat upright in the cab and gazed up at the great stone palazzi with her round blue eyes, as if she could pierce all their secrets. Her odd pointed Russian cap seemed to give her a queer sexless quality. She really *was* a boy in her dream life, he suspected—a Renaissance page in scarlet trunk hose; a figure out of a story by Boccaccio. He could imagine her bearing a silver platter loaded with wine and fruit to some alone Princess. The Princess—was her name Neifile?—would have a musical instrument by the side of her couch—a what-do-you-call-it? — and Dioneo's long fine fingers would stray across the strings. There in the artificial dusk of the Florentine afternoon Moyra-Dioneo would sing lightly about love and turn his round eyes upon the adored one, in amorous entreaty. It was all got out of books, of course. But the restricted school-marm that she was, in the world of reality, found an outlet that way. He couldn't blame her. Dreams, dreams, dreams! To every man and woman, the dream life is sacred. He must "tread lightly" lest he tread on her dreams. Had he really gained anything, he wondered, by letting life impinge upon his own?

At dinner, freckled, red-haired Mabel Watson, with her truculent eyes and her torrential gush of learning, relegated him to the position of "Herr Ober." He was attentive, silent — save for an occasional remark to Margery, worked in edgewise

— but efficient in regard to the ordering of the meal. There were, it appeared from Mabel's ecstatic talk, certain things at Bologna which Moyra *must* see. Mabel was going to Bologna as soon as Mrs. Vincent returned from Lucca. Couldn't Moyra come too? She *must* come. Mabel knew a small and cheap hotel. She was ruthlessly insistent. Gilbert was aware that he did not exist, for either of them, though Moyra had the grace to feel embarrassed by the calm way in which Mabel ruled him out. "Why don't you go," he said to her—darting into the conversation. "You'd enjoy it." Moyra looked at him and blushed painfully. She wanted to go, and she knew that he knew it. This made it all the more awkward. She hated having to hurt his feelings; and all that Mabel could get from her in the way of a promise was that she would think it over and tell her in the morning.

After dinner they went to one of the Cafés in the Piazza Vittorio Emanuele, for their coffee and liqueurs. The place was crowded. Out of the corner of his eye Gilbert could see Louis Mathers and Aubrey Sutton, and two or three other men, laughing at a distant table over a carafe of red wine. Mabel's ecstatic art chatter made him want to slink off to them and talk bawdy, talk dogs and horses, talk scandal, politics — anything with guts in it. Astounding how these girls contrived to render nauseous one of the primal interests of his life! He felt as if he never wanted to look at a

picture again and remembered, gratefully, the spluttering manifestoes of Marinetti and the Italian Futurists. Faugh, these school-marms and their museums! His irritation was rising to fever point when suddenly Margery Vincent, who, in rapt absorption of the scene around her, had been paying no attention to her companions' chatter, exclaimed "Coo. What a lovely man!" Gilbert's glance followed hers and rested, with equal admiration, on a peasant boy with dark eyes and olive skin who was playing a guitar in the square, beyond the fringe of chairs and tables. His velvet-black eyes and occasional quick smile were being employed with conscious art for professional purposes, but his body had a natural and unconscious grace which his rough clothes could not conceal. Every pose, every movement was a delight to watch, and the child who gazed at him was held spellbound.

"How Mummy would love to see him without his clothes on," she observed at last.

There was silence. The blessed word "Cinquecento" died away on Mabel's lips. Her flood of conversation stopped dead. Gilbert smiled a saturine smile behind his cigarette. How these museum mummies really dreaded beauty! "Isn't it getting rather late, darling?" Mabel drawled, looking up at Margery. "You'll be awfully tired to-morrow, you know, if you sit up."

Margery looked at the usually reckless and exuberant Mabel in blank astonishment. So

Mabel was "grown up" and stuffy, too, underneath her cameraderie. It was a bitter disappointment. "Well, I like that," she said, resentfully. "It isn't eleven yet and look how many times I've waited up for you!"

Gilbert saw his opportunity and interposed. "If Margery wants to go to bed," he remarked, "I can see her home to the pension, if she'll let me. You and Moyra will be all right here."

The suggestion was favourably received by all parties, including Margery, whose sharp instincts told her that men were in the world to be made use of, and that with Gilbert as a companion she need not go to bed until she chose.

Margery marched Gilbert away, down the Via Tornabuoni, towards the river. "Is your Mother a sculptor?" Gilbert asked.

"Oh, don't you know," said Margery, "she makes things called 'figurines.' They're like Tanagra statuettes. I mean they're about the same size. She made a lovely one of me that's in one of the galleries at München. . . . Look! Egg-beaver!" cried the inconsequent child, seizing Gilbert's arm. "Royal egg-beaver! That gives me a game."

Gilbert gazed in bewilderment into the Café before which Margery had halted him. "There he is," she hissed. "Down there on the right, reading the *Corriere della Sera.*" The person indicated had a bald and glistening head — and from his cheeks and chin grew an abundant red

beard. Margery now explained the mysteries of her favourite pastime. "And you score just as in lawn tennis," she said. "But when you spot an egg *and* a beaver together, that counts two points, and when you see a *Royal* egg-beaver it gives you the game. The Royals are the red ones, you know. He's a beauty, isn't he!" She gazed with rapture at her find, just as a naturalist might gaze at a rare species of butterfly.

"I think we'd better move or he won't love us," Gilbert suggested. The Royal egg-beaver had dropped his newspaper, and was turning upon both of them an inflamed and angry eye.

They walked on down the crowded street, and Margery scored another three points. She was an expert. "I had a fearful disappointment the other day," she remarked. "I was lunching with Mummy at the Park Hotel and I saw a whole herd. It was in the men's lavatory. The door was half open, and I looked in by accident and saw at least seven, all adjusting their beavers before the looking-glass. One of them was a Royal, too! But Mummy wasn't there at the time to play with, so it didn't count."

Gilbert felt, not for the first time, a spasm of curiosity about "Mummy." He must, he decided, make a point of meeting her. Through Margery he got reflections from her personality which intrigued him. Mrs. Vincent was not a crank, at all events. But, since — as he had gathered—she was the widow of a major in the

regular army who had been killed in 1915, she might be unbearably "social." He hoped she was not a perfect lady, skilfully keeping up the appearances of old decency on a very limited income. Not but what a certain amount of old decency might not prove attractive after Cleopatra's court of birth-controllers, unfired food experts, and what not. . . .

They came now to the Arno, and stood for a moment looking over the parapet. The sky was unfathomable above them, its darkness mitigated by a faint unseizable light. It was a sky which seemed rather to draw them up into itself than to shut them in. "I wonder why on earth Omar called it an 'inverted bowl,'" said Margery, as she gazed upwards at the flickering stars. "I wouldn't call *that* the lid of a soup tureen, would you?"

But Gilbert did not feel talkative. The night, and the star-reflecting waters of the river had filled his brain with memories. And memories, when we are not so young as we were and cannot yet admit to middle age, are apt to be disconcerting things. "Why was I never told," he quoted, "that the heart grows old!"

He looked at the Wandervögel striding along by his side, and smiled at her. It was perhaps the first time in his life that he had ever looked at a child with parental tenderness. He was beginning to grasp, at last, the significance of the fast approaching forties!

The girl, with a quick instinct of sympathy, linked her arm in his, and without talking again they walked on to the pension on the Lung' Arno Amerigo Vespucci. "Good night, queer man!" said Margery, when Gilbert had rung the bell for her.

"Good night, Wandervögel!"

The door opened and closed, and Gilbert turned back along the river and walked slowly to the Pont Vecchio, a prey to miserable reflection for which he could find no excuse save self-indulgence. He wondered how Chloe and George were getting on together, and what would happen to his son — his child and Chloe's, the child whom his selfish poverty and Chloe's selfish passions had left without a home. As members of the commonwealth, he and Chloe, it seemed to him then, had done a great wrong. They were both equally to blame. It was six of one and half a dozen of the other. But there was no real excuse for either of them. Chloe had gained her thrill; and he had gained his freedom. He was no longer the jaded tram-horse, dragging along the back-breaking load of a wife and family. He was a free man. But might not the unfortunate Gillie have to pay for it? And if he had to pay, would he ever forgive either of them?

Gilbert's thoughts went back to his own childhood, to his mother and father, conventional middle-class Victorians living in a stuffy vicarage in a south London suburb. Probably they fell

from their own standards, and perhaps they had their moments of acute misery under the marital yoke. But at least they knew where they were. They had their code: and they had managed to stick out the difficult years so that in his boyhood and during his schooldays, and until his father and mother were both dead, he had possessed a home, a home that went on, a home where there were always meals at regular hours — meals that seemed to appear by a process as natural as the coming of night and day. He realised now how much this comfortable, if uninspiring background had meant to him, what a protection it had been, how much it had contributed to his self-confidence. No doubt the old system had grave defects. But it was, at least, a system, and one which rendered necessary the virtues of discipline and self-control. What was there to take its place? Sex-talk, birth-control, sham science, social chaos, and — perhaps — the liberation of the individual! For what were they heading? But no. People always became pessimistic when the years began to tell on them! The new generation, after all, was represented by the Wandervögels and not by the Kate Crockers. The children would find their own way out all right. No need to worry about *them*. It was the men and women of his own age — adrift between two periods — who must inevitably have the rough crossing. The safest plan, for the artist at all events, was to cut out marriage altogether, to reduce sex to its lowest common factor, to become

a spiritual beaver and defy the feminine lust to clip and tidy! The safest, perhaps, but not the easiest. "Nature," he reflected, "has a nasty way of keeping trump cards up her sleeve."

CHAPTER XX

"THEN you'll go straight home from Bologna?" Gilbert asked.

It was the morning of Moyra's departure. She was in pyjamas, bending over her half-filled suitcase, while Gilbert sat on the edge of the bed, smoking and watching her pack.

"I think I'd better, my dear," she replied. She did not look around at him, but he could see that her face and neck were flushing. "I told you I should be a disappointment, didn't I? Do you remember, when you drove me home after the Beggar's Opera? But I don't think I knew then how true it was."

She came and sat by his side, and put her arm caressingly round him. Kisses came easily to her, and even now she failed to realise the effect on Gilbert of her facile amativeness. She put her head on his shoulder and her loose hair touched his cheek.

"I'm afraid I've cheated you . . . and I didn't mean to."

"I wonder if you can possibly have cheated yourself?" Gilbert asked.

"I don't think so. I am nearly thirty. I really ought to know my own nature by this time.

I've cared for you more than for any other man I've ever met. But I've nothing to give you that you really want. Physical things . . . ugh! I hate that side of life."

Gilbert wondered, bitterly, what she supposed her arms and lips were if they were not "physical." "We live in a queer unnatural world," he said.

"Perhaps I'm a queer unnatural woman," Moyra replied. "But there are many like me. My work is everything, and the girls I lecture to mean very much more to me than any man could ever mean. And I hate children and don't want a child. I realise now how rottenly I've treated you. I ought not to have come away with you. It wasn't fair. . . ."

Gilbert kissed her tenderly. "You've given me a great deal," he said. "But I'm afraid you are married to your books, dear, and my love for you has seemed a kind of adultery. We can't help the way we are made. If you married me, I can see now I should only make you unhappy."

"And I you."

"Yes."

"Well, we can at least be thankful that we've found it out in time . . . and been honest. Our friendship remains, Gilbert, doesn't it?"

"Yes. We've rescued that from the ruins, at all events."

Moyra got up and stood by the window. A

shaft of sunshine fell on her hair, making the strands of gold among the brown shine and sparkle. She looked very small, almost elfin in her mauve silk pyjamas, and Gilbert's old hunger to possess her gnawed him afresh. It wasn't to be borne! She had no right to her beauty, no right to harass a man like this, to stir up the healthy normal appetites which she wouldn't gratify. She couldn't be such a fool as not to *know* what she was doing! Oh, well, she was leaving him, anyhow. In two hours' time she would be on her way, and the chapter ended.

He got up quickly from the bed and went through the communicating door into his own room. . . .

What Gilbert found most difficult to tolerate in Moyra was her assumption of moral superiority. What he could only regard as an unfortunate pathological condition which psycho-analysis, if it were really any good, ought to be able to remedy, she exalted as a sign of her superlative purity and refinement. On their way to the station, Moyra became passionate in her denunciation of what she called the "physical side of life," and dithyrambic about "Beauty" and about "Art," which she assumed to be exclusively spiritual.

Gilbert just simply "wished she wouldn't." He did not want to start an argument, and he did not want her to leave him with, so to speak, a bad taste in his mouth. There were so many aspects

of her nature which he loved — why must she show him now the one which he had most reason to detest?

"I don't care what you say," he burst out, at last, "but you'll never persuade me that men and women who starve the flesh and deny it and revile it don't starve the soul as well. . . . Don't you remember how Nietzsche says somewhere that he couldn't imagine a God that didn't dance? Everything dances — the great rhythmic dance of the universe. Everything that's *alive* dances. But you hate dancing. You *can't* dance! You're a dead thing that can't dance. And you're going away with another dead thing that can't dance, to stare at the Beauty left behind them by men who could. And you think you'll get something from it. You won't. Not really. You can't, because you *can't dance!* You hate 'the physical side of life' because you aren't truly alive. If you were you'd know that soul and body, while we have breath, are indivisible."

"And isn't it you that's the quarrelsome man now!" said Moyra, become ultra-feminine in a moment. His violence had brought out in her the coquette, the Irish charmer with the seductive voice to whom, when they first met, he had so easily fallen a victim. The octopus, with its tentacles! "Well, I'm damned!" thought Gilbert. "Women really *are* the devil!" But the tentacles had got their grip on him, and the weather changed. They were both laughing heartily

when they arrived at the station and found Mabel Watson waiting for them.

"Hullo!" said Mabel, with her usual truculence. "I got your ticket for you to save you waiting in the queue. There's nearly forty minutes before the train is due to start, and it will probably be late, but you know what a curse railway travelling is in this country! It's no good leaving anything to chance. Mrs. Vincent missed her train coming from Lucca, and was hours late. Margery and I were in a fearful stew about her!"

Gilbert went to the bookstall and bought Moyra the Continental *Daily Mail* and himself a packet of Macedonia cigarettes. He was impatient to be gone. Indeed neither of them could conceal from the other an eagerness to get the parting over. Moyra, now that she was with Mabel, had become suddenly a different person. She had more poise and assurance, was more profoundly at ease than she had ever been in Gilbert's company. She laughed and chattered as if a weight had been lifted from her mind. Gilbert watched the two girls together, for a few moments, and it was a revelation to him — or rather a confirmation of what he already knew. To men Moyra was a coquette and little else, to other women a potential friend. He wondered whether Chloe had really understood her. . . .

"I say, don't you bother to wait to see us off, Gilbert," Moyra remarked, when he rejoined her.

"Our suit-cases are quite light, and in any case there are plenty of porters."

Gilbert offered his hand to Miss Watson, who held it absent-mindedly. Moyra kissed him as if he were a very little boy, and he half expected her to give him a pat on the back and a bar of chocolate as well. He wished the two girls *bon voyage*, and strolled out of the station—free! He had broken out of one more prison; and when he explored his own sensations he found himself not so badly hurt as he had expected. In any case, the hurts were nothing in comparison with the joy of his escape from bondage. He walked on in the bright April sunshine and found himself looking at the familiar city as if for the first time. He had no one's whims to consult now except his own. He could hoard his appreciations, like a miser.

When he came to the Duomo, he went in and tiptoed across its dark cavernous expanses to have a look at the Della Robbias—a secret debauch of "sight-seeing." The place was crowded with little groups of men and women carrying Baedekers. Guides pointed, and shouted hoarsely, and earnest women turned jaded eyes at the indicated object. It was amusing, in a depressing sort of way. To think that for every visitor who enjoyed Florence there must be at least two who endured it from a sense of duty!

Suddenly Gilbert's attention was caught by a group of people who entered the Duomo in a compact body. They seemed to be pushing in front

of them a young man who was in the last stages of fatigue. Something about both the young man and his party seemed vaguely familiar. Gilbert walked across the cathedral in their direction, and at last recognised them. It was Burns and his select ladies and gentlemen! Captain Tupp's white spats were unmistakable. And as usual Mrs. Valentine was straying from her own party and getting mixed up with another. There they all were. Burns had—heaven knew how!—brought them back intact from Naples. It was a marvel.

Gilbert shook his friend warmly by the hand. "The party," in its usual condition of despair, began to surge round him. Mrs. Masters, in particular, seemed to have a secret trouble which she wanted to unload upon someone—upon anyone who was not Mr. Burns. They looked ruthless and insatiable. *How* they wanted to ask questions! How tired and bored they all were!

Gilbert's heart bled for Burns, but he felt that he would only add to the conductor's difficulties by lingering. "Can you get out to-night?" he whispered. Burns nodded. "Then meet me at Nardini's at half-past eight," he said.

"Thank God!" said Burns, with a wan smile. "I'll be there all right."

CHAPTER XXI

GILBERT lunched at the Villa Flora, in the hope of meeting the Wandervögel and her mysterious mother, but to his disappointment they were not there, and Cleopatra did not mention them. The only other guests besides himself were Tobey Walker and Betty Carson. They looked the picture of misery. Tobey was bored and jaded, and Betty evidently irritable and dissatisfied. She was a tall, bony girl with a long, pointed nose, fine dark eyes, and an untidy mop of black hair. Her complexion was sallow: she looked vaguely unhealthy. She was dressed, apparently, in "lengths" of "art" curtain fabric. Her frock was an "art green" curtain and over it she wore an "art" terra-cotta cloak. Gilbert thought—probably because he had not entirely outgrown the *goût du tablier* of his adolescence—that she would have been much more effective in the uniform of a parlourmaid. Art women appalled him: he sighed secretly for crinolines.

Cleopatra was extremely solicitous on his behalf throughout luncheon, her eyes swimming with unshed tears. "You poor boy, your heart is aching, I know it," she seemed to be saying to him. But it wasn't, really. He was enjoying his food, admiring Dodge's taste in wine, looking with delight at

the sunny garden, thinking of his new novel, contemplating a volume of essays, congratulating himself on his appointment with Burns, following amusing trains of thought, recreating himself. He had buried the corpse of his abortive love-affair and had no tears left to shed over the grave. In the hope (as she supposed) of distracting him from any suicidal inclinations from which he might be suffering, Cleopatra took Tobey aside when the meal was over and urged him to spend the day with "poor Gilbert." "I'll look after Betty for you," she said.

Tobey's face lit up at the suggestion. He heaved a sigh of sheer thankfulness. A day's escape! It was a wonderful thought. He raced across the garden to where Gilbert was sitting with Austin Dodge, and begged him to come out and "explore." The moment they were safely outside the gates of the Villa Flora, Tobey's high spirits began to return to him. "Cleopatra's a great dear," he said, "but I'm getting rather restive. I want mountains and a piano. I don't think I shall stay much longer. I shall take Betty back to London and then go North for the winter—or perhaps I shall go to Germany, or to Ireland. Italy doesn't suit me. It's too hot and dusty, and I don't like pictures or architecture. There isn't enough green about. I must have a green country, with mists and rain. I like to get wet through and muddy, and then to come home and sit by a fire and take my boots off and eat a large tea. I think

my great-grandfather must have been a Scotch peasant. I understand peasants in mountainy places, and like them—but not the Latin kind. I hate all this oil and macaroni and dark flashing eyes and olive skins, and the hard blue sky, and Verdi, *bel canto*, popery, passion—and all that." He waved his arm to include the whole of the Florentine "stage." A passing cab-driver, startled from sleep by his gesture, pulled up by the side of the pavement.

"I always knew you were a Protestant at heart," said Gilbert, laughing, as they settled themselves in the cab. "That is why you have been forced to invent a philosophy of life to justify you in following your inclinations. That's the Protestant mind, my boy. Hatred of auricular confession is at the bottom of it. The Catholic is much more practical. He enjoys himself, pays for it, and then enjoys himself again with a light heart, maintaining all the while the most courteous relations with Almighty God, thanks to the charming affability of the saints. It's all ever so much simpler. But you, you are just like George Maynard Brown. You are always adjusting yourself to your Nonconformist conscience, and trying to make yourself feel that what you do is right because you do it."

"Duomo!" growled the cabby, pointing with his whip at the most easily identifiable of all the Florentine sights. "Oh, go on!" cried Tobey. "Forward. *Avanti!* Get along with it." The

cabby shrugged his shoulders, and whipped up the horse, and they began once again to rattle slowly over the granite setts. Gilbert loved cabs. He liked to take his afternoon nap in them, and could never get over the sense of well-being which—after so many years of poverty—a cab drive invariably gave him.

"Oooh!" said Tobey, hugging himself with emotion. "I like that. Nonconformist conscience indeed. At least I'm not a religious reactionary like you. You used to call yourself a Bolshevist and go into dithers about the bally old 'Dawn' and all the rest of it, and rush about calling everybody comrade. How well I remember you in 1919!"

"Now, Tobey! It's tactless to discuss a dead *grande passion.*"

"I know, and I'm sorry if it smarts. All the same, you know, you did go completely off the rails about your smelly 'comrades' and the brotherhood of man and the rising of the red sun and so on, and that was just your religious emotionalism. You don't really believe in progress a bit. You got caught by catch phrases, but you never got down to brass tacks, or thought how you could free yourself and your own circle from the fetters of convention. That's the difference between us. I've got a social conscience, if you like. I've got a practical job, and I do it. I believe in the future. I suppose, from your Bolsh standpoint, you'd sneer at me as a 'reformist.' "

Gilbert laughed. "I'll admit you are a martyr

to your convictions, my dear Tobey," he rejoined. "I never said you weren't. From my point of view, to change one's mistress every three months would be as boring and as nerve-racking as having to get a new flat once a quarter. The art of life demands a reasonably long lease in both particulars. . . . I'll even admit that in some cases the repressed young things whom you make it your business to liberate, from the noblest of motives, gain a good deal from your educational activities. But what I don't see is where *you* come in. Frankly, I don't much like being myself, but I'd like still less to be you."

"I can stand on my own feet. You can't."

"In a way, I suppose that's true," Gilbert admitted. "But in another way, it isn't true."

"You go in off the deep end such a lot," said Tobey, pursuing his advantage.

"But, then, you see, I *like* the deep end. I've learnt how to swim."

"Swimmers have the worst time when they're drowning, you know."

"Oh, come on, let's go and have tea, old thing," said Gilbert, laughing. "The world's in a muddle. There's nothing left to believe in, and no way out. If we want salvation we shall have to go to the East to look for it. The West is finished. We have no Gandhi. We haven't even a Mustapha Kemal! The virtue is gone out of us. Let us eat and drink."

They told the cabby to go to Gilli's, and on

the way to the famous *pasticceria*, discussed the approaching marriage of Cleopatra and Austin Dodge. Here again their views diverged, because to Tobey the very word "marriage" was like a red rag to a bull. He thought Cleopatra ridiculous, and Dodge a mercenary knave. But Gilbert insisted that they were well matched, that Dodge's contribution of intelligence and position was a fair equivalent to Cleopatra's money, and that the marriage ought to be a great success for both of them.

Later on, at Nardini's, where they dined, they were joined by Louis Mathers and Aubrey Sutton. When they had finished eating they sat at a table in the street outside, and ordered more Chianti. Tobey, waxing eloquent over his wine, held forth once again upon his mission. He inveighed particularly against "vice hounds," and talked psychoanalysis to prove that the journalists and publicists who denounced the immorality of reformers and got modern novels burnt by the police were themselves obviously addicted to the most shameful secret vices. "They can't stand daylight in their dark cupboards, these people," Tobey exclaimed, "and that's why they hate us. They gloat over 'sin' because they really love it. They want secrecy and suppression, what they call 'reticence,' in order not to lose their delicious private thrills. But the new generation is doing away with all that. They really do believe that human love is a sacred thing, and that all the details concerning it ought to be as

sweet and open as the sunshine. They bathe naked in the sea, whenever the police will let them. They aren't ashamed of their bodies, unless they are very ugly, and they aren't ashamed of their instincts. They want to make life more beautiful than it ever has been during the Christian era. They may make all kinds of mistakes, but at least they won't be *furtive*. That's why dirty, drunken journalists, who made money by urging others to go and get shot in their stupid war, are so fond of denouncing them in the Sunday papers at ten guineas a column. They can't stand youth, those people. The war proved it."

Tobey might have gone on indefinitely, had he not been conscious that his audience was a little out of sympathy, and had he not remembered that Cleopatra had invited to dinner the two attractive English girls whom she had picked up the other day at Fiesole. Aubrey Sutton had watched him, while he talked with a veiled smile. A gentle malice lurked at the back of his dark eyes. Sometimes his manicured hand had tapped the table; but not impatiently. Mathers, taking deep draughts from his carafe, had wondered with quite a spasm of interest whereabouts in his foggy native island the young things bathed *sans maillot*. When Maurice Burns emerged from the darkness into the circle of light round their table, Tobey excused himself, and strode off towards the Villa Flora.

"I like those strenuous open-air types who wear old clothes and tennis-shirts and no hats," said

Mathers. "Let us meet him again, Gilbert. Clever ways with the women, those chaps have."

"Women, I must have women," Maurice Burns misquoted. "There's nothing relaxes the mind like them! I can tell you," he said, turning to Gilbert, "that my mind needs relaxing. Thank the Lord, I've only another ten days of the party. Got to take 'em to Venice on Tuesday. Then we go back to Milan and they skedaddle home by themselves. Blast them."

"Have some wine," said Mathers, calling a smiling boy in knickerbockers and ordering two more litres. "It's better again to-night. It has been bad recently, very bad."

Gilbert explained that his friend was reacting against his party of selected ladies and gentlemen.

"I expect he feels a desire for some kind of excess," said Aubrey Sutton in his delicate drawl.

"Ha, a problem!" Mathers exclaimed. "Shall he slop over emotionally—in which case I can send him to call upon an attractive young woman to whose eyes he may compose sonnets, and upon whose bosom he may, after three days' intensive courtship, possibly be permitted to recline? Or shall he, with less expenditure of time and money, visit the Troll King's daughters and have done with it?"

"Personally, I can't see how one *could* do either," Aubrey replied, dropping his monocle and sipping his rough wine as if it were Château

d'Yquem. "One gets a certain *macabre* effect in the via delle Belle Donne, I admit. It's all very well for schoolboys who have read a little Maupassant. But quite, quite crude. As for the other business!" He laughed, shrugged his shoulders, and laid a thin reproving hand on Burns' knee.

"Aubrey is right," said Mathers. "All that sort of thing is a shade too operatic for the man of taste. Too much the Teuton's notion of Italy. Lyrical stallion serenading! *Tenore robusto* sweating profusely. Flash of dark eyes, clammy embrace, song of triumph, snore of satisfaction! Wouldn't do for you, my boy. . . . Not that I dislike women myself," Mathers went on. "On the contrary, I'd do a lot for a charming woman. I married several, you know, when I was your age. . . . But one ought to take women in small doses when one grows old. Poor dear Gilbert is, of course, a sentimental monogamist. He wouldn't agree with me. Fatal thing, sentiment."

Mathers squared his shoulders and threw back his head with its horns of grey hair, in a gesture of defiance or of triumph. The wine had mellowed him and he was forgetful of to-morrow's gout. But was he really quite so triumphant as all that? "When you find his sore spot," Gilbert reflected, "you find the man himself. And it is just our sorest spot that we take the greatest pains to conceal. What is Louis', I wonder?"

But if his self-sufficiency was a pose, it was

one which had become second nature to Mathers. He had taught himself to believe in it, and his humorous enjoyment of the Italian scene had helped him.

"What a night!" said Burns, looking up dreamily at the stars. "Who could help being sentimental! Even the air is like a kiss."

"*Caresse aérienne!*" crooned Sutton, who had never really got much beyond the 'nineties. He quoted the lines of which Burns' remark had reminded him:

"'Premiers soirs de printemps: tendresse inavouée . . .
Aux tiédeurs de la brise écharpe dénouée . . .
Caresse aérienne. . . . Encens mystérieux . . .
Urne qu'une main d'ange incline au bord des cieux . . .
Oh! quel désir ainsi, troublant le fond des âmes,
Met ce pli de langueur à la hanche des femmes?'

Gallic sentiment has its practical side, I suppose. All the same, they *do* know how to do it." He went on quoting:

"'Premiers soirs de printemps: brises, légères fièvres!
Douceur des yeux! . . . Tiédeur des mains! . . . Langueur des lèvres.
Et l'Amour, une rose à la bouche, laissant
Traîner à terre un peu de son manteau glissant,
Nonchalamment s'accoude au parapet du fleuve,
Et puisant au carquois d'or une flèche neuve,
De ses beaux yeux voilés, cruel adolescent,
Sourit, silencieux, à la Nuit qui consent.'"

"Oh, chuck it, Aubrey," said Mathers. "It reminds me of Massenet. Douceur des yeux! . . . Tiédeur des mains! . . . Langeur des lèvres! Heavens, it's enough to make a healthy

man vomit. And the French mind thinks that that is poetry! Incredible. Let's walk it off."

They paid their bills and strolled down the street into the Piazza della Signoria, now almost deserted. They were all a little drunk. Aubrey, unusually talkative, began to whisper to Louis Mathers about getting some "snow." He "knew a place." Mathers merely shrugged his shoulders. The great nude statues opposite the Uffizi looked cold and unearthly in the moonlight. "Come, David, you're getting a big boy now!" said Louis, putting his hat chastely over David's nakedness. A caped policeman, standing motionless in the shadow of the Loggia dei Lanzi, eyed him unheeding.

When they reached the Arno, Aubrey Sutton and Mathers drew together instinctively and walked ahead, leaving Burns and Gilbert to their less recondite consolations. "I wonder where they are off to," Burns remarked. Gilbert declined to hazard a guess. "Never inquire about another man's drug," he suggested.

"What's the point of all this drug business—cocaine, heroin and all the rest of it?"

"Escape through illusion. Forgetfulness. To be drunken. We all need it, and long for it," Gilbert replied. "The difference is that you and I are content with wine—and dreams."

"I understand the need for escape," said Burns. "But one wants a bit of ground to stand on, even more."

"Yes. An anchorage — with a fairly long chain."

"After all, one must drop back to one's starting-point. One ought to have, in every sense of the phrase, a *pied à terre!*"

"Only self-love can give you that." Gilbert laughed harshly.

"Or the real *grande passion*—if it exists. In other words, selfless love."

Burns was trembling a little and Gilbert also suddenly shivered. They paused near Orioli's book shop, and resting their elbows on the parapet, looked down at the river. The delicate arm which rose from a black boat and supported a fishing-net cut the dark luminance of the sky like a sharply-outlined question mark. The stillness was unearthly.

"I suppose it's our own fault," Burns said. "We're in the middle of the everlasting sex war, and the women are winning. Men are naturally polygamous. They always have been and always will be. And women have discarded loyalty in consequence."

There was silence for a moment. "Yes, but men haven't," said Gilbert, in a voice that hardly rose above a whisper. His heart was beating painfully, and his face flushed in the darkness, so great was his emotion.

"I believe that's true, Gilbert," Maurice answered. "Thank God, if it is."

They walked on for some time, without talking,

turning instinctively towards the heart of the city, to hide their embarrassment in some crowded café.

An hour later Burns said good-bye to Gilbert. He would not, he said, be able to escape again from his party before his departure for Venice. They exchanged addresses and agreed to meet in London, in a few weeks' time.

CHAPTER XXII

After Burns' departure, Gilbert felt a sudden home-sickness for London, and his presence also was required there by his publisher, and by the man who was collaborating with him in turning his novel, "The Silent Stranger," into a play. It was astonishing, after so many lean years to discover how a success succeeded! With the publication of that wretched book, money seemed to pour in upon him from the most unlikely quarters, and had he been in financial difficulties, any publisher would now have been willing to pay him a substantial cheque on the signing of a contract. The number of copies sold of his book, in the United States, seemed fabulous — fifty-nine thousand! In Great Britain, and the Colonies, counting the cheap editions, the sales had already exceeded thirty thousand. His agents had just paid three thousand pounds into his bank, and there would be more to come. The negotiations for the sale of the option on the play were now (so it appeared from his collaborator's letter) on the point of completion. And *Who's Who*, repenting of its past neglect, had invited him to confide to a curious public the secrets of his birth and parentage, career, and recreations.

All this material success was, in a way, frightening. When he had been unable to gratify any single one of his desires and ambitions he had always known precisely what he wanted to do. At the time when he was unable to pay the rent of his Earl's Court tenement, he had discovered the perfect, the supremely desirable small house for sale in Holland Street, Kensington. He might go home and buy that house now, if it were still in the market. But he no longer needed it. He recalled also how once, when on a holiday with Chloe in Sussex, he had come across an old red-brick cottage, in a hollow of the downs, about a mile from the coast. It was to let, and the rent was ridiculous — twelve pounds a year. But they hadn't had the money to take it and furnish it. How often had they "gone over" that enchanting place, the cottage of their dreams, and filled the long low rooms with imaginary chairs and settles! Gilbert could never get the memory of the lovely old house out of his mind. It haunted him. And now all he had to do was to take the next train back to England, to rush down to Sussex, and try to secure it. There was nothing to prevent him. The money was in his bank. And when he had spent what was there, more must inevitably come to him. He wasn't in the slightest danger of starvation, and he had no dependents except Gillie, for whose education he had already provided. He was free to please himself. It was a delicious thought, but not without its spice of bitterness. His sudden

prosperity had made him feel more than ever homeless — the odd man out. He decided to go back to London in a few days' time and look for a really comfortable flat. Then, perhaps, when he had furnished it to his liking and settled himself in it, he would go abroad again in the spring, if he could get Maurice Burns to accompany him.

With these plans in his head, he called one afternoon at the Villa Flora, to say good-bye to his friends. As he neared the house he saw that the loggias were crowded with people. Cleopatra had evidently been giving a tremendous luncheon party. He had a sudden attack of nerves at the prospect of meeting a number of strangers — this was a disease from which he had suffered at intervals all his life, and it was a point of honour with him never to give way to it. Instead of slinking away, therefore, among the trees and making his escape unnoticed, he walked on until he was recognised, hailed and brought into the house by Austin Dodge. Most of the new faces made no impression on him whatever. But there was one which he instantly recognised, though he could not for the life of him recall where he had seen it before. But those dark blue eyes, that small laughing mouth and the narrow, very slightly Roman nose with finely cut nostrils were curiously familiar, and instinct told him that before his life ended they were going to be more familiar still. He felt certain, too, that she was

the Wandervögel's stepmother. It was not a case of "love at first sight." He was not struck dumb with admiration of this woman, nor swept off his feet by her. The emotion he felt was comparable to what he might have been expected to feel had he, after an interval of twenty or thirty years, suddenly encountered a sister. His recognition of this face was in his subconscious memory.

While his brain was occupied with impressions about this woman, who had probably scarcely noticed him and was sitting too far off for Cleopatra to effect an introduction, Gilbert heard himself chattering in an animated way about his intention to leave Florence, about his dinner with Tobey, and Louis Mathers, and Sutton, about Maurice Burns and his comic tourists. Cleopatra covered him with reproaches for going away so soon, and begged him to take up his quarters at the Villa. She was going to give a dance, she said, "to celebrate an important occasion." This last was in a whisper; and Gilbert realised that he was supposed to be unable to guess the nature of the "important occasion." Her approaching marriage was the deepest of deep secrets! Cleopatra, bless her heart, was getting the last ounce of excitement out of her romance. But not even the prospect of seeing Cleopatra reappearing, radiantly, before all her friends as Mrs. Austin Dodge made Gilbert change his plans. Now that he had decided to go, he was impatient to be away — he was really almost gone. He had that feeling

which comes over one towards the end of a holiday of being already on the way back. Part of him had gone ahead, to London.

He was wondering how soon the inevitable would happen, and he would find himself sitting next to the woman whose face had so disturbed him, and who was now involved in a conversation with the redoubtable Miss Kate Crocker, when the Wandervögel made one of her surprising entries. Nobody inquired where she had been, but there was a faint *soupçon* of tomato about her upper lip, which suggested a secret visit to the kitchen, and exercises in conversational Italian with the cook. The Wandervögel was known to have a criminal lust for tomatoes! She stood for a moment swinging her straw hat by its gentian blue ribbon, when she suddenly noticed Gilbert and bore down on him.

"Hullo," she said, "we haven't seen you for days! I told Mummy you knew how to play beavers, and she got awfully excited. Do come and tell her about the Royal-egg we saw in the Café." She put out a small, cool hand and dragged him to his feet.

Cleopatra beamed. "Take Gilbert over to Mrs. Vincent, dearie," she said. "He hasn't been introduced yet."

The Wandervögel took him; and in a moment Gilbert found himself at the far end of the loggia shaking hands with the woman whose face he had recognised. Margery disappeared to find

cushions, but Miss Kate Crocker, remembering an appointment with a lady in dire need of instruction on the subject of birth-control, rose from her chair and said good-bye effusively to Mrs. Vincent. "I just *have* enjoyed our talk," she said. Mrs. Vincent smiled charmingly.

Gilbert ensconced himself in the empty chair (though he hated chairs already warmed for him), and Margery, returning at that moment, sat at his feet on both the cushions.

Gilbert found Josephine Vincent's conversation easy and interesting, and curiously different in tone from that of any other members of Cleopatra's circle. Her humour was spontaneous, constantly bubbling to the surface like the bubbles in a glass of champagne; and so absolute was her restraint and self-control that she could allow herself to be unusually frank and gracious. Was her cheerfulness a little glacial, like bright sunshine on the snow? Perhaps; he could not be certain yet. And the line of her mouth, where it was not curved in a tolerant smile, had it not a touch of cruelty and ruthlessness expressed in it? Again, he could not be sure. There was no malice in her pleasant gossip, but there was something judicial in her clear glance which suggested that with her the quality of mercy might be intermittent. She was dressed in green, of a shade which admirably toned with her bright hair, and he noticed that she was *maquillée* with the subtlest art. Her age, he guessed, was thirty-four or thirty-five. The sur-

face impression which she made was of a well-poised, well-bred, contented woman, confident and self-sufficient, knowing her world, observant and intelligent; but withdrawn. In that detachment, in what caused it and in what it meant, lay, he guessed, her secret. She had a life of her own, interests of her own, which she did not share with anyone — her mind was a walled garden, perhaps, in which she alone walked. Trespassers would be prosecuted — perhaps executed. (Those eyes looked capable of a capital sentence!) But that did not daunt him.

While they drank their tea and talked about pictures, about Florence, about London, about the friends they had in common, Gilbert gradually ceased to exist as Gilbert Vayle, and became merely the novelist at work, as inhuman as a portrait painter studying his subject. With the artist's absolute lack of scruple he tried to clamber up that wall and to look over the top. All his intellect, sensitiveness, imagination, experience, and understanding were bent to that one end. It was an obsessing, but not an ignoble curiosity. He must know more about this woman even than she knew about herself. And if he, in his turn, lay exposed with all his weaknesses, folly and self-indulgence before her pitiless eyes, what did that matter? His collection of personal idiocies and oddities were merely the queer fleshly envelope in which his talent was wrapped up. He would "give himself away" happily in handfuls, if by so doing

he could weaken her guard and creep into the citadel of her heart. In the moment when she had Gilbert Vayle, the man, at her mercy, she herself would inevitably be revealed to Gilbert Vayle, the observer and recorder. All these thoughts and ideas remained in his subconscious, uncoined in words and phrases, and while he laughed and chattered he was scarcely, with his outer brain, aware that all the time he was probing, testing, exploring, watching, studying the woman at his side.

Gilbert's progress with Mrs. Vincent was assisted, almost violently, by the Wandervögel, who made no secret of her regard for him. Even his most fatuous remarks seemed to enchant her. "Mummie, do ask Queer Man if he'll come and dine with us at our beastly pension," she urged, when her mother showed signs of making her departure. Mrs. Vincent turned and looked at him and smiled.

"Yes, I do wish you would, Mr. Vayle, though the food isn't anything to boast of."

Gilbert accepted with pleasure and then, as an afterthought, suggested that they might like to dine with him at his hotel, for a change. Mrs. Vincent considered the matter for a moment, but again allowed herself to be stampeded by the Wandervögel who produced the unanswerable argument that they would be able to play beavers. "It's no fun at the pension," she explained, "because we know all the beavers there by heart."

So they went off together, found a cab outside Cleopatra's gates and drove into Florence. Two hours later saw Gilbert waiting for them in the foyer of the Hôtel Mazzini. He had almost given them up, when at last they made their appearance. With them there seemed to enter the commonplace hotel a ray of light and colour, a kind of clean, tonic brilliance. Josephine Vincent, from the first moment of their meeting, had made that impression on him. In a queer way, she suggested a shining sword blade, and her voice held in it the laughter of courage in unequal combat.

The dining-room of the Hôtel Mazzini was much like the dining-room of every other hotel of its kind throughout the world, and the food was as completely devoid of native idiosyncrasy and charm as the management could contrive to make it. The guests were of all nationalities, but of a perfectly uniform dullness. Mrs. Vincent, who was dressed in a wine-red frock, with a red rose at her neck (the Wandervögel was still faithful to gentian blue), gave the room one quick glance, and Gilbert, who read her thought, wished that he had had the sense to take them to some *trattoria*, to Nardini's or to the Nuova Toscana. He guessed that she knew this sort of thing too well not to be bored by it.

If the food was rather characterless, the Cinzano Asti was excellent. Mrs. Vincent was a good talker, quick, tactful, and intelligent. She had the knack of creating the successful dinner

party "atmosphere," and he guessed that during her married life she must have been a singularly pleasant hostess. The conversation soon turned upon Florence of which she seemed to have a very intimate knowledge. To Gilbert who — accustomed as he was to short holidays — was inclined to take the "sights" for granted, and to get the atmosphere of a city from a lazy café crawl, his guest's description of the surrounding country was a revelation of all that he had missed. She told him about Vallombrosa, with its sombre pine woods; about the two streams, the Affrico and the Mensola, which Boccaccio must have known so well in his boyhood; and about the little hill of Incontro, where St. Francis — the brother of the little birds — encountered that angular zealot, Saint Dominick, who instigated the massacre of the Albigense. "It must have been a strange meeting, that," said Gilbert. "I wonder if Brother Juniper was with St. Francis, and if he saved the situation by making an inspired ass of himself!"

Juniper was a great favourite of Mrs. Vincent's. "I believe he must be one of the best drawn characters in any literature," she said. "He is so perfectly drawn that you can't describe him— except by quoting the actual words of the *fioretti*. 'Inspired ass' isn't a bit right, you know. There isn't any of the real flavour of Brother Juniper in that!" Josephine Vincent seemed to know all the famous stories connected with the castles and villas in the neighbourhood of Florence. Most of them

Gilbert had read in his childhood in a fascinating book by Mrs. Oliphant, but many he had almost entirely forgotten. She reminded him of the beautiful Ginevra dei Benci, whose portrait he remembered in Ghirlandajo's fresco in Sta Maria Novella. "Surely you know the tale of Ginevra?" she asked. But Gilbert shook his head. "While the poor child was playing hide and seek on the evening before her marriage, she hid herself in a great *cassone* of carved wood. When she got into the chest, the heavy lid fell down upon her, snapping the lock fast. In vain her parents and her distracted lover searched all the rooms in the palace. Many years afterwards, when the old chest was forced open, they found her body. Her long fair hair was still beautiful, and in her right hand she grasped a jewel which the bridegroom had given her to fasten her gown!" She told him also the story of Tullia d'Arragona, the courtesan, who aspired to be another Sappho, and whose verses—polished up for her, no doubt, by Benedetto Varchi—had at least been good enough to induce the appreciative Duke Cosimo, on the strength of them, to excuse her from wearing the yellow veil. "Benedetto's house, the Villa Fontebuoni, is within easy walking distance. You really ought to go and see it—and the Villa Palmieri, too, which is of course much more magnificent. That's supposed to be the place to which Pampinea led her companions, in order that they might not be disturbed. Don't you remember

the description of it in the Decameron? I've often looked for the Ladies' Valley, to see if I could find the little lake in which they bathed, but I've never been able to find it. Perhaps it has disappeared: though things last long in this country."

Gilbert did not like to ask her about her ancestry, but he realized now, in a flash, his guest's resemblance to a much-painted Renaissance type. Was it of one of Lippo Lippi's Madonnas that she reminded him, or was it of a portrait of one of the d'Este family? The picture for which he was groping in his memory kept eluding him. If he could only recall it, it would perhaps explain why it was that he was so certain that he had seen her before, explain that curious sub-conscious recognition.

"I do hope you haven't written a book about Florence," he remarked, laughing.

"Good gracious, no," she replied. "There are at least two thousand gaunt English spinsters living here—some of them have lived here for generations—and everyone of them has compiled a large work. What the feminine section of the English Colony doesn't know about the history of Florence, of its principal families and ancient buildings, simply isn't knowledge. They are indefatigable. It's scarcely decent."

"It's lucky the Villa Flora is too modern to have a history," Gilbert observed. "Otherwise Austin Dodge and Cleopatra would be busy writing it. As it is I suspect Dodge of a mono-

graph on his beloved fountain. How that man adores Baroque! As soon as they are married, Cleopatra will buy him a touring car, and off they'll go together to Lecce, with the excellent Martin Briggs open on their laps. Mosquitoes, bugs, and Baroque always go together. Poor Cleopatra, what a time she'll have of it for the next few years!"

"It's my belief that they are going to be very happy," said Mrs. Vincent, quickly. "She deserves to be, anyway."

She took a meditative puff at her cigarette and gazed straight in front of her. Gilbert wondered what her thoughts were about.

"I say," put in the Wandervögel, "do you like walking?"

"At night I do," Gilbert replied. " But not in the day time. I'm dreadfully lazy, and the cabs here are much too cheap."

"Because I've got a splendid idea. There's a huge moon going on outside, and it would be perfectly ripping to walk up towards S. Miniato, as far as the Piazzale. We'd see Florence all shining and wonderful at our feet, wouldn't we, Mummy? I love that sort of fairyland feeling, you know, sort of . . ." The Wandervögel blushed and "dried up." With her, "sort of" always indicated an attempt to express the inexpressible.

"Don't let the child bully you into taking us for a walk if you don't feel energetic!" said

Mrs. Vincent, "but it might be rather nice up there."

Gilbert thought the idea excellent, and they set off without delay. When they had crossed the river and were nearing the Porta Romana, they turned down a dark street and were met by a crowd of two or three hundred people following—in absolute silence—four men with guitars. They marched in step, and at a sharp pace. Then suddenly the leaders began to sing the inevitable "Siamo i fascisti," which was taken up enthusiastically by the marching crowd. After a while there was silence again. The leaders of the party appeared to have an objective, for when they reached a certain house they halted their followers. One of them then advanced a few paces, struck an attitude and began to sing a love song in a high tenor voice. The singer made up in emotionalism what his voice lacked in quality, and sobbed and choked with the greatest fervour.

Windows on all sides were thrown open, and eager heads appeared. When the song was over there were cries of *"bravo!"* and *"bene! bene!"* Gilbert listened entranced until the singers again moved on, with the crowd following them as before.

"Some of the older *stornelli* and *rispetti* are charming," Mrs. Vincent observed. "I'll hum a few of the airs to you if you like, when we get away from the houses."

When they were among the planes and cypress

trees of the beautiful road which leads along the hill-top to the Piazzale Michelangelo, Gilbert kept her to her promise. Where they paused, there was a wooden seat on which they were glad to sit after their climb. "I wish I had my guitar with me," Mrs. Vincent said. "It's such an amusing instrument."

"Sing 'Sette bellezze,' Mummy," Margery suggested.

"Yes, if you like," Mrs. Vincent replied. "It's a description of the seven beauties the perfect woman ought to possess."

In the still night, while the moon bathed the road in front of them with liquid silver, her voice rose with an almost inhuman purity. It was a voice which seemed as passionless as the notes of a flute.

"Sette bellezze vuol' aver la donna:
Prime—che bella si possa chiamare;
Alta dev' esser senza la pianella
E bianca e rossa senza su lisciare;
Larga di spalla e stretta in cinturella;
La bella bocca, e il bel nobil parlare.
Se poi si tira su le bionde trecce,
Decco la donna di sette bellezze."

Gilbert begged her to sing again. "I don't know why, but I don't feel like it to-night," she said. "When it rains I sing for hours, sometimes, to keep my spirits up. This night needs nothing."

"One more, Mummy!" urged the enraptured Wandervögel.

Mrs. Vincent thought for a moment. "Here is rather a characteristic old peasant song. It comes from Pisa, I think. Perhaps you know it?

"'Quando nascete voi nacque un bel fiore,
La luna si fermò nel caminare,
Le stelle si cangarion di colore.

O Biondina, come la va,
Senza la vela la barca non va!'"

The air of the *stornella,* full of "*fioriture*" and "*girigogoli,*" had a charm which lost nothing in the rendering. Gilbert, always deeply moved by a beautiful voice, was too much stirred to make any comment. "Come along," cried Josephine, jumping to her feet, "let's get on to the Piazzale and look down at Florence!"

They walked on quickly, and in silence until, arrived at last at the famous point of vantage underneath San Miniato, they paused and stood spellbound at the beauty of the scene before them. There, framed in its half-circle of shadowy hills, the city lay transfigured in the moonlight. It was a dream city, lovelier in its unearthly dignity and grace than anything that the imagination could conceive. The Wandervögel uttered one "Oh!" that was almost a sigh. Then she turned away from the parapet, and went down the steep path and hid herself among the trees. Gilbert stood still for some minutes before he noticed that he was alone. They were minutes of sheer ecstacy, ecstacy of a kind which he had only once experienced since his boyhood. When he awoke, as if

from a trance, he turned to look for his friends, and followed them down the hill. For a while he could not find either of them and paused to look again on Florence. Then at last he saw Josephine. She was gazing down at him from under a great cypress tree on the right of where he was standing. The moon shone upon her face and hair, and he could see that she was smiling. Immediately he recognised her, not as Josephine Vincent but as his dream companion of that far-off but unforgettable night. His heart beat painfully as he ran towards her. "Oh!" he cried, "it's you!" This time she did not vanish, and the lips that met his own were real — and warm.

. . . . . .

"Well, you really are the Queer Man!" said Josephine, with laughter in her voice. It was the same low musical laughter, and the eyes, which danced with amusement as they looked inquiringly into his, were the same compassionate eyes that he so well remembered. To think that he had taken all this time to realise who she was.

"Some time I'll tell you," he said, rather confusedly. "I . . . recognised you."

She laughed again, and taking his arm led him down to the road. He was vaguely conscious of being, ever so tactfully, "managed." "Here's Margery!" Mrs. Vincent exclaimed.

The Wandervögel came running to meet them. "Kiss me, too, Gilbert!" she said, panting for breath. "Kiss me, too!" She threw her arms

round his neck and gave him a childish hug. Then she observed meditatively, "I knew Mummy would like you. You see you're so awfully funny!"

CHAPTER XXIII

In London Josephine Vincent seemed like a brilliant modern picture in an old and elaborate frame. Her house at Hampstead near to the flagstaff had been inherited by her husband from his father, and with the exception of Mrs. Vincent's long drawing-room, remained very much as Margery's grandfather had left it. The Reverend William Vincent, D.D., had been one of those comfortably-placed clergymen of the Victorian era who preferred the pursuit of the more respectable branches of scholarship to the cure of souls. He had been a demy of Magdalen, had subsequently married and settled down in a charming Georgian Rectory in Herefordshire. Here he lived the easy life of a country gentleman, rode occasionally to hounds, travelled when the fancy took him, and spent his abundant leisure in the study of the Divina Commedia. At forty-five a mild spell of ill-health, caused principally by boredom with the country and a growing impatience to live for a year or two in Italy, impelled him to retire from his spiritual labours. The two years in Italy on which he had for so long set his heart completely restored his vigour. On his return to England, he bought the delightful house at Hampstead,

which Margery and her mother now adorned, and in a year or two gave the results of his studies to the world in the shape of two imposing volumes. The remainder of his life he spent cultivating roses in his small, but sunny garden, presiding over meetings of various Dante societies and reading papers to learned institutions. His only son, Alan, after leaving Wellington passed creditably through "the Shop." Alan Vincent's first wife was a Bavarian girl, the daughter of a diplomat, whom he had encountered at a ball in Rome. This lady was drowned about eighteen months after Margery's birth. Three years later, in the summer of 1913, Captain Vincent, as he then was, had met and married Josephine Daubeney, the daughter of the doctor in his old Herefordshire home. Dr. Daubeney, who was a widower, died just before the outbreak of the war, happy in the thought that his only child was comfortably settled in life. Less than two years after his death, Major Vincent was killed. Since that time Josephine and Margery had lived quietly at Hampstead, Josephine surrounded by a circle of more or less devoted admirers whom with consummate art she kept at a distance, but seldom allowed entirely to escape. These details of the family history Gilbert became acquainted with in small instalments, as his friendship with Josephine ripened. He and the Vincents had travelled home together, breaking the journey for a pleasant week of shopping and theatre going in Paris. Arrived

in London, Gilbert had declined to let the friendship lapse and Josephine had acquiesced. She accepted his invitations to dine, to go to theatres or to dances, giving him always to understand — though not offensively, for her manners were excellent — that she realised what a favour she was conferring upon him by so doing. They discovered that since they were of about the same age, and both, as dancers, belonged to the period of the waltz, their rather elementary jazz steps suited one another, and whenever the band grudgingly vouchsafed a waltz they enjoyed themselves immensely. Josephine sometimes even admitted as much, during the drive home.

As the weeks went by Gilbert found himself, unexpectedly at peace and contented. He took a comfortable maisonnette in a street of Victorian respectability in the St. John's Wood district, furnished it with the help of Josephine's excellent taste and of Maurice Burns' practical eye for comfort, established Maurice there as a guest, and acquired the habit of dining with Josephine and the Wandervögel on Sunday evenings. Josephine liked singing for him, and to listen to her was one of the rarest joys he had ever experienced. But sometimes the sound of her voice made him profoundly uneasy. It came to him, as it were, "over the garden wall," from inside that secret self which she kept so carefully from his prying eyes. That she had feeling, and perhaps passion, and that she still retained a great deal of her youth was once

betrayed when he chose for her a favourite song by Brahms, the "Leibestraum," which she also particularly liked. When she was not singing, however, her manner remained one of reserved graciousness, of rather heartless kindliness and rather guarded friendship. He could not possibly complain of this as far as he himself was concerned; but it troubled him to find her repressing herself in this way — withering as it were, on the stalk, becoming incapable of folly. Charming as her home was there were times when he could have wished it burnt to ashes with all its imprisoning contents — the portraits of the Vincents, the miniatures and silhouettes of the Daubeney's, the family treasures acquired during generations of comfort which watchfully regarded her, which she jealously preserved. It enraged him to see a high-spirited, intelligent woman turning herself thus into a kind of super-parlour maid. He wanted to take a hatchet and cut her out of her frame. Let her go back to it in twenty years time, if she must. For her to cling to it now was a denial of life, a base avoidance of all the sorrows, the pangs of grief, the thrills, the ardours and endurances of the adventure of living. She was turning herself, at thirty-five, into the sheltered Victorian widow!

If Gilbert arrived at these conclusions, it was because he had watched her closely and knew her well. On the surface, any one more daringly modern and unconventional than Josephine it

would have been impossible to discover. She scandalised her particular corner of Hampstead by her "goings on." Queer foreigners and odd-looking Bohemians constantly came to her house. Secure in her own unassailable virtue, she adhered in theory to principles of startling modernity, the mere enunciation of which would have shocked her husband and given her father a stroke. She was interested also in politics, in "movements," in modern thought and modern literature, and—as a critic — she had an uncanny insight. Of most of Gilbert's productions, she held, if possible, a lower opinion than he had himself, and contrived to be candid without hurting his feelings.

Safely anchored at last, in so far as his own affections were concerned, Gilbert was in no hurry to try to waken Josephine into the response which he so much desired. What she gave him already made such an enormous difference to his life that he could not bear to risk its loss. He did not refer again to the scene in the Piazzale Michelangelo, content that she should ascribe it to moon madness and to the beauty of the night. For the first time in his life he trusted blindly to Destiny: had confidence in his star. Sooner or later he would come to her — when they were ready for one another, and not before.

Maurice watched the progress of his friend's latest love affair with absorbed interest, and much melancholy foreboding. "She's a delightful woman, a staunch friend, perhaps the perfect

mistress for you," he remarked one night, as they sat together over the fire in Gilbert's room, "but why on earth do you want to marry? You aren't a poor lamb who doesn't know. I should have thought. . . ." He took a drink from his glass of whisky and soda and stared, ruminating, into the fire. "Surely Josephine would sooner have you as a lover than a husband?" he went on. "Her views on marriage seem to be almost as unconventional as Tobey Walker's."

"Perhaps — on the surface. But not underneath," said Gilbert. "It's the desire for children which drives people into the noose."

"Ugh, I hate children." Maurice shuddered.

"I've told myself for years past that I hate them. But I don't believe it's true. I badly want a daughter: and I miss Gillie. I wish I had the sort of home that he could come back to for his holidays. Josephine likes him — they took to one another immediately. She is good with children, and she would make an excellent mother. If she takes me on, I simply haven't the right to deny her a child if she want's one. That means we shall have to marry. But there's a very big 'if.' "

"Not so big as all that," said Maurice, cynically. "The average 'admirer' runs like a hare if it ever comes to actually taking the plunge. Didn't you see Maugham's play, 'Caroline?' The 'unattainable'—*she's* the real attraction. The danglers who mean business are a scarce commodity. Besides, women usually like you.

It's probably the way your hair grows, or your occasional helplessness, or a look you've got in your eyes as if something was hurting you. I don't know. Women have their own reasons just as men have. Nobody has ever solved the mysteries of attraction!"

"I'm afraid you are flattering me, my dear boy," said Gilbert, laughing. "But to return to marriage, one of the worst things about it is the awful asceticism it usually involves." He looked round the cosy room, watched the firelight shining on the decanter and the soda water syphon, looked at his own toes in comfortable red Turkish slippers, and at Maurice's kindly and familiar face. "It would mean leaving all this, for example. Slippered ease and perfect freedom mean a lot, when you've only arrived at them after seventeen years of struggle, misery and servitude. They're a temptation at all events."

He stretched himself luxuriously in his chair and refilled his glass, wondering if he had deceived Maurice by his half-truths. Maurice looked at his friend and smiled rather dismally. Then he called softly to their cat. "Goo! Goo!" From somewhere in the shadows there came a feline gurgle of pleasure and a heavy black half-Persian cat emerged and leapt with luxurious deliberation on to Maurice's lap. First it arched its back, then it put its paws on Maurice's shoulders and looked him in the face. Then it looked away with an expression of boredom that was almost contemp-

tuous: then sat down sticking a hind leg up in the air while it bent its head and solemnly bit and licked the fur on its belly. Then it stopped this operation, yawned, settled itself really comfortably, put a paw over its nose, and took no further interest in the proceedings. Maurice and Gilbert watched their beloved Guli in complete silence, absorbed. Everything he did, every movement he made struck them as being perfectly beautiful: they loved him with the anxious tenderness and affection which a mother is supposed to lavish on her youngest child. They coaxed him to his food, applauded his big game hunting exploits — he liked to drag home the carcasses of half eaten rats, and would scratch at their doors to attract attention to his prowess—rose in the cold dawn to let him in or out of the flat, scoured the streets for him when he got lost, gave him the most comfortable parts of their beds to sleep on and would not move for fear of disturbing him. He was the beloved tyrant of the household, and his great gold eyes, aloof, mysterious and without a glimmer of affection in them, had a charm for both Maurice and Gilbert which never failed in its effect.

"Well, one can't have everything, I suppose — " Gilbert reflected, rather lugubriously counting his chickens before they were hatched. "Maurice will have to have Guli!" He experienced, in advance, all the pangs of separation. Then he laughed aloud as the thought came to him that he had been complaining of the way Josephine

was "framed" and imprisoned in her furniture when all the time he had been busy trying to "frame" himself in precisely the same way. There they were, Josephine and he, two healthy active people, both on the bright side of forty, rapidly growing into "bachelors with settled habits!" No, it was better to wear out than to rust out. Let the weather be fair or foul, he'd go out in it until he died.

"Maurice, old boy," he said at last, "if I can persuade José to risk it, I shall have another shot at married life. Yes, even in 1923! I don't believe there is anything wrong with marriage, in itself. It isn't old-fashioned. On the contrary it is an institution for which the human race has not yet shown itself worthy. These reformers are on the wrong tack. It's we, not the sacrament itself, that want improving. My chances may not look bright, but José will help me, and I shall do my best. It's an adventure, Maurice. *The* adventure! And at least we've both of us had some experience of what we are in for."

"At least," said Maurice, "between the two of you, you'll have enough to live on if you don't play the fool with it. And that's the essential thing. But I wish you luck, Gilbert, with all my heart. When you've fixed it up I shall borrow fifty quid from you and go to Tahiti. That's *my* dream, you know. No marriages for me!" They shook hands when they parted to go to their respective bedrooms, for they both realised that from

now onwards their ways lay apart. "Good luck, old man," said Maurice. "Go in and win. If it doesn't work out all right, come and join me in the South Seas."

CHAPTER XXIV

GILBERT had just got back one day after lunching at his club, when a double knock came at the door — the official post office knock. It was a telegram, from Mr. Wilson-Hepburn, and the message was, "Come at once; boy seriously injured." He wrote out a reply, with shaking hand, then, putting some things into a suit-case he drove to Waterloo. He was fortunate in arriving just in time to catch a train. Short as the journey is to Woking, it seemed to him interminable, and all the time his thoughts were on his son. Until the receipt of this news that Gillie had had an accident, and might perhaps be dead, he had never completely realised how much his hopes were bound up in the boy, and how much he loved him, how much he had wanted to do for him, how greatly, as a father, he had failed. Less than a week ago, Gillie had spent the whole day at Hampstead with José and the Wandervögel. The little devil! He had occupied most of the afternoon chasing Margery round the garden and yelling at the top of his voice. And then what a tea the child had managed to put away! José spoilt him, utterly. Surely, surely that sturdy little ruffian in the blue jersey, who was so clearly going to

grow up into an active, athletic man, couldn't have gone and injured himself permanently? A broken leg, perhaps — it couldn't be anything worse. His mood alternated between hope and despair as the minutes, with what seemed unbearable slowness, ticked themselves away.

When at last he arrived at Woking, he rushed out of the station, and hurried along the familiar streets towards The Laurels. The clean and joyous April sunshine mocked his fears and made even suburbia look radiant. The door was opened to him by old Mrs. Marsh, the Wilson-Hepburn's housekeeper who had once been Chloe's nurse. He had no need to ask any questions now. "Oh sir!" she gasped. "Oh, sir!"

"Where is he?" he murmured.

"In his cot, upstairs, the poor little innocent, with a smile on his face like he used to have when he was playing."

Gilbert ran up the stairs, and was met on the landing by Mr. and Mrs. Wilson-Hepburn. The old man — who adored his grandson — was crying, silently. And even in his agony, Gilbert could not help noticing the splendid way in which Mrs. Wilson-Hepburn was rising to the occasion. "Chloe is with him, Gilbert," she said, in a hushed whisper. "Go in to her."

He went in to the nursery. The blinds were half drawn and patches of sunlight fell on the polished floor. Chloe was kneeling by the cot in the corner of the room, looking intently at Gillie's

white face. Gilbert went quietly over to her and put his hand on her shoulder and looked too. So Gillie was out of it all! Nothing left of him but a little battered male body, lying there waiting to be put in a hole in the earth. Gilbert wondered how soon the essential Gillie, a stranger to his parents as they were strangers to one another, would contrive to find another fleshly tenement. How long would he have to wait for his next troublesome earthly journey — years or centuries? "Anyhow, better luck next time, Gillie," he murmured. "Better luck and happier parents."

Chloe began to cry silently, and Gilbert's arm slipped round her in a familiar gesture of sympathy and comfort. For a moment they both forgot the fact that they were officially disunited. Between them they had brought into the world the child whose small broken body lay so near them, still and stiff in death.

This was really the breaking of the tie that bound them, Gilbert reflected — not the divorce, not Chloe's second marriage: but Gillie's death. This was indeed the end. They had met, loved, parted: but while the child lived they knew that they had never really escaped one another. They were still related. And now the relationship was broken.

Chloe began to tell him how the accident had happened. Gillie had hit his ball into the next garden. He had climbed the wall to go after it — a very difficult and daring climb for him. And

then he had lost his balance and fallen right down on to the paving stones by the back door and broken his neck. He had climbed the wall at its highest and most dangerous point because it was only there that he could get foot-holds — all the rest of the wall, the new part, was too smooth. "Nobody was in the garden when it happened," Chloe moaned. "They didn't find him till nearly half an hour afterwards. He was dead by the time I got here." They clung together for a moment, unable to speak. Then Gilbert led her out of the room and closed the door behind them. He had noticed that she was going to have another child, and with a care for her that came natural to him, had thought it best to take her away. . . .

Chloe's condition was gratefully seized upon by Mrs. Wilson-Hepburn as an excuse for the exercise of her gifts. Over the teacups she developed a ghoulish cheerfulness and talked relentlessly about the political situation, the perfidiousness of the French and the future of Mr. Lloyd George. Gilbert was grateful to her. They all wanted to be alone: but since they all had to be together, and would not be able to escape until after the funeral, this was probably the best way of enduring it. He developed theories about the League of Nations, and argued with Mrs. Wilson-Hepburn as to the desirability of re-arming the Germans.

CHAPTER XXV

"So there wasn't really anything else to do about it," said Tobey, rather shamefacedly. They had met casually in Piccadilly, about two months after Gillie's funeral, and Tobey was telling Gilbert the news about himself. "Of course, I was never really a bigot on the subject of marriage. I always realised there were exceptional cases when one had to conform. . . ."

"Oh Tobey," said Gilbert, "Oh Tobey!"

"You never *really* understood my point of view, you see," Tobey went on. He was confused, and for once in a way rather flustered. He was terribly afraid that Gilbert would think that Betty Carson had married *him*; aware, too, that the Tobey legend was in danger of going to pieces. And it wasn't so easy to explain, there were *nuances* in the situation which defied all his efforts at exposition. Gilbert ought to *understand*. "Betty understands *perfectly*," he said, with unusual vehemence.

"I'll swear she does."

"Oh, well, if you are going to be unfriendly about it . . . "

"What rubbish," Gilbert retorted. "I'm delighted. I always thought it would happen,

and I shall insist on being godfather to the first."

"There isn't going to be a first, or a second either."

"Then why marry?"

"Look here, I'm off," said Tobey, now genuinely irritated. "Come and look us up. We've got a flat in Harcourt Street — top floor, number 22. And by the way, Dodge and Cleopatra are in London, happy as birds. They're staying at the Carlton." Tobey waved his hand and dived into the Dover Street Tube Station.

Left alone, Gilbert strolled vaguely in the direction of Hampstead. He was supposed to be at the theatre attending a rehearsal of "The Silent Stranger," but he had long ago discovered that the author, particularly if he were an unknown and amateur playwright, was regarded by the producer and the company alike as their natural enemy. They never paid any attention to his suggestions if they could possibly help it, and the long and dreary proceedings filled him with impatience. The play was to be put on in three weeks' time, and he determined to leave it alone until the dress rehearsal. He had an instinct that the show would make money. Somehow, everything he touched made money in these days — now that he didn't so very much care whether he made it or not. The world was become a pleasant, rather prosaic place; and he told himself that he had grown too old for rapture, too phlegmatic for ecstacy, too much seasoned by emotion ever again, in the Baudel-

airean sense, to be "drunken." All the same, if his steps were taking him anywhere they were taking him towards José. When he got as far as Baker Street Station, as the sun was hot and he felt tired and rather dusty, he got into a cab and gave her address.

José and the Wandervögel were both in the garden when he arrived, sitting in deck chairs under the big pear tree. He had guessed they would be there, and had walked straight through by the side door, without troubling the maids.

Margery noticed him first, and shouted his name with her usual enthusiasm. She threw him a cushion to sit on, and looked at him with close, maternal scrutiny. "Mummy," she observed, "I *do* think you're rotten to Gilbert. He obviously wants a rest and a change. (Don't you, old thing?) Why don't you take him down to Mrs. Blodgett's cottage at Burlton Ledge, when I go to Aunt Mary's and make him bathe every day before breakfast?"

José blushed, rather prettily. She belonged just enough to the older generation to be taken aback at moments by the Wandervögel's modern candour. "Perhaps he doesn't want to bathe every day before breakfast, poor man. Do you, Gilbert?"

"I'm frightfully lazy," said Gilbert. "But I'm good at doing what I'm told. And of course, I like to be told."

"That's arranged, then!" said Margery, who

had conceived this plan for Gilbert when she had noticed the change in him after Gillie's death. She wished José had conceived it first — of her own bat. But José, even if the idea occurred to her, would have smothered the thought and done nothing about it. Sometimes Margery felt that the education of her step-mother was almost beyond her capacity. But she did not despair. José would yield to treatment in time. Firmness and patience would do the trick! "I'll make Mummy wire to Mrs. Blodgett at the cottage at Burlton Ledge, and you'll both start off from Waterloo, towels in hand, at eleven o'clock on Monday morning. You won't want any bathing costumes, because The Ledge is quite deserted and nobody minds. I shall see you off, and then I shall go and irritate Aunt Mary."

The Wandervögel grinned malevolently at the thought of irritating Aunt Mary. "She's thoroughly stuffy, isn't she, Mummy? I feel it my duty to wake her up. I've invented a little song for her. It goes like this."

The Wandervögel threw her head back and emitted loud noises, like a boy scout's howl. As far as Gilbert could discover the words of the "song," the serenade to Aunt Mary, were as follows:

"I'm pro-German, Yah, yah, yah,
I'm pro-German, Yah, yah, yah,
I'm pro-German, Yah . . . yah . . . yah."

"After that I show her for the 'umpteenth time

my photograph of Hans, standing on a slope of the Wetterstein with hardly any clothes on, looking like a Greek God," Margery continued. "And then Aunt Mary nearly chokes and looks as if she'd like to tell me that Mummy is an awful woman to allow it. It's great fun. Almost as good as egg-beavers."

"It may be for you," said José, "but I expect Aunt Mary really *does* think I'm an awful woman. Besides, we aren't all as pro-German as you are. The Aunt Marys are in the majority."

"Mummy, *don't* pretend to be as middle aged and pre-war as that," said the Wandervögel. "It doesn't suit you, and it won't impress Gilbert in the least. He thinks he's middle aged, too. Nothing left to live for. *L'homme fatal!* Incipient dyspepsia and all the rest of it. I know. It's all rot. All he needs is fresh air and exercise. You're both of you as young as anything. . . ."

"What's that got to do with being pro-German?" said Gilbert.

"Why, Germany is the country of the young," said the Wandervögel rapturously, "the country that's alive, vital, splendid. France is a wretched, corrupt old miser, cruel and perfidious, used up, impure to the very bottom of the cash-register it calls its heart. All my generation is pro-German," added the Wandervögel sententiously. "We love music and dancing, and lakes and mountains, and wine and song."

"And beer, bathing, binges, and Bavaria,

too, I hope!" said Gilbert, who received a well-aimed cushion as a reward for his interruption. "It will really be rather amusing, though," he went on, "if Germany and the Germans become our closest allies in four or five years' time. It's quite likely, when you come to think of it. After all, we and the Germans understand one another ever so much better than the French and English ever will. German hospitality and amiability and their sense of humour *and* their ernstness are qualities that should make friendship with them easy. They aren't so terribly insular as the French. The French wear their amiability as they wear their pretty clothes; they haven't any humour, and their hospitality is all on the street. Besides, they really want to blow our island to smithereens, if they get the chance. They are the real militarists of Europe, just as they were a century ago."

"You and your latest fashions!" snorted José. "Just because the Bosche is all the rage this year, you both of you must go off your heads about him! I think these wild enthusiasms for countries and races are just as bad as their opposites, race hatreds. People everywhere are good and bad, as you find them, and all countries have their virtues and their vices. I'm not going to revile the French just because I don't like the French Government. I don't like the English Government either. I think they're both composed, if anything, of worse scoundrels than the fools who blundered us into

war between 1900 and 1914. I'm pro-French, pro-English, pro-Irish, and pro-German, too. I'm pro-everybody!"

"Of course, the truth about Mummy is that she has a g.p. for Italy," observed the Wandervögel, shrewdly. "That's why she didn't mention Italy in her outburst. You'll learn that about Mummy when you grow older, Gilbert. She's a masterpiece for not mentioning things. It's high-bred reserve, by Meredith out of Jane Austen."

"Now then, you two!" Margery's affectionate "digs" at José always amused Gilbert, and they never annoyed José. She had her own methods of retaliation, and she controlled Margery as a skilled driver controls a high-spirited and favourite horse. She had a deft hand with "the ribbons."

Tea was brought out to them, and demurely poured by José into blue china cups, thin and almost transparent. José had the knack of refraining from too much artiness. If she were pre-war, she was also, in some details, pre-Omega. Her house contained no "leadless glaze."

When the exactly right moment came for his departure, Gilbert received the delicate wireless hint automatically emitted by José, and rose to go. He was perfectly well aware that the Wandervögel wanted him to stay until he got bored, to stay for weeks, if he liked. She accepted him, and when she accepted a person it meant that he was free of the house. Her hospitality was Russian in its

completeness and its unconcern. But José had been properly brought up. She really wanted him to stay and talk to her, she wanted to show him her work, to have him to herself: but she was inhibited. The proper length of time for an afternoon call was up, her brain registered the fact, and Gilbert went.

Margery saw him to the street, and as he turned to leave her she said: "*Did* you see Mummy come all over girlish, when I suggested she should take you down to Burlton Ledge? Gilbert, if you two don't come back properly married, I shall never never forgive you, so there!"

CHAPTER XXVI

Mrs. Blodgett's cottage lay concealed in a hollow of the Purbeck Hills, about half a mile from the sea. It was a small stone house with a "stoep" in front of it and a long garden ending in a ragged wood through which ran the pathway to the beach. The house was roofed with flat slabs of grey Purbeck stone and the whole of the ground floor with the exception of the principle living room, was paved. Gilbert had in his life travelled many hundreds of miles to escape from civilisation into some unspoiled and undiscovered country, but never — save, perhaps, in Wicklow — had he been anywhere so completely off the beaten track as Burlton. He knew Dorsetshire very well, but though he had been from one end of the country to the other, he had never even heard of Burlton. To get to the high road, from the cottage, one had to walk for five and twenty minutes across the hills. Nothing on wheels could reach it except perhaps a farmer's dog-cart driven with care. The nearest railway was eight miles distant.

The house stood completely isolated. The nearest habitations were a farm about a mile away,

the shepherd's cottage which was close to the farm, and a desolate coast-guard station at Burlton Cove, distant about a mile and a half.

Gilbert and José arrived, carrying their suit-cases and a large parcel of provisions bought in Corfe, at tea-time on a cloudless May afternoon. Mrs. Blodgett, an ample and eccentric woman dressed in black alpaca with a large Cornelian brooch at the neck, was there to receive them. She took José almost at once into the kitchen and explained where everything was and promised to come in the morning and get the breakfast. She was staying with her sister, the shepherd's wife, who was "expecting." But personally she thought it would be a fortnight at least, probably longer. And she didn't see why Sarah should be fussing about it, seeing why she had already buried three. "But sometimes when we're that way we wants company like. And I thought that you and the gentleman would probably be able to manage your suppers." José assured her that she and the gentleman could certainly manage their suppers, and after a few finishing touches to the preparation in the kitchen, Mrs. Blodgett put on her bonnet and departed, leaving Gilbert and José to themselves.

After tea, they both changed into their oldest clothes. Gilbert attired himself in a pair of grey flannel trousers and a tennis shirt, and José replaced her travelling clothes by an old green frock that had seen much service. "You won't want shoes or stockings," she called out to Gilbert.

"There's nothing to hurt your feet between here and the sea."

When they were ready, with towels over their shoulders they walked down the long garden and through the wood, until they came to the stretch of greensward which ended abruptly in the cliff. But there was a pathway down the cliffside leading on to Burlton Ledge, a flat expanse of rock which the sea covered at high tide. The sun poured down upon them, and the sea, over which hung a very faint mist, glimmered with a pearly radiance. It was a dead calm, murmuring sea, caressing with the tiniest plash the little beach by the coast-guard's cottage and giving the rocks on which they were sitting, a voluptuous watery kiss. Out at sea there were curious stretches of emerald green water, long thin lines of green separated one from another by blue expanses. And close to the horizon a toy steamer, with no smoke rising from her funnel, moved slowly onward as if impelled by clockwork. It was a coasting vessel making for Poole harbour. Looking inland they could see in the foreground the long indented line of yellow cliffs; the little cove, once the headquarters of a gang of smugglers; and above it the green, maternal breasts of the Purbeck hills.

"How mad we are to run about Europe, José, when we have this — four hours from our own front doors! It's so difficult to find what is so to speak under one's nose. One searches in all

directions, rushes wildly about the world — and all the time the thing sought for. . . ."

"Is really hidden inside one's self," said José, with a curious smile. "The adventure of life is finding one's own soul. *Gnōthi seauton!* If you can achieve that, you can find all heaven in your own backyard. Travel only narrows the mind, and we all do it because we shrink from the job of finding our true selves. Meanwhile I'm going to find my true self in the water. Come on!" José slipped off her clothes, fitted a red rubber cap over her hair, and stood in the sunshine, on a ledge of rock. She waited for Gilbert to join her, then they dived together into the amorous inviting sea. They swam out slowly against the advancing tide through little pockets of intense cold into stretches of water that were almost as warm as the Adriatic. When they had gone about two hundred yards from the shore, they floated on their backs in the sunlight, silent, in ecstacy. Is not the sea liquid magic? Sea-lovers keep silent while they are swimming, just as lovers of dancing keep silent while they dance.

When they got back to the ledge José ran like a wild creature round the flat expanse of rock. She had pulled off her bathing cap and her swathes of bright hair shone in the sunlight as she ran with long lissome strides, stretching out her arms as if in invitation, to the gentle breeze which came from the sea. Gilbert had never seen this José before. He could hardly recognise in the girl exulting in

her health and her physical perfection the assured social figure whom he had met in Florence and come to know in the dignified surroundings of Hampstead. It was a new José; the real José perhaps. Their race in the sunlight left them warm and glowing and practically dry. They put their clothes on quickly and walked back up the cliff path, and over the short springy turf to the little wood behind which lay the cottage.

It was a moment of happiness so complete that Gilbert, who was apt to distrust good fortune, could hardly believe that he had not once again "crossed over" into the dream world, that it would not all vanish in some drab awakening which would leave him again bereft of José, as he had been bereft of her before.

After supper, as they sat out on the stoep, in deck chairs, looking at the moon which shone down over the garden and threw into dark relief the group of trees at the end of it, he tried to tell her about his dream life, and the part she had played in it.

"Then you really *did* think you recognised me that night in Florence?" José asked.

"It's queer. I've never been able to understand why I wasn't more surprised by your strange goings on! I wasn't you know. It seemed natural enough, some how. And yet I didn't recognise you . . . then. . . . "

"And now, José?" he asked.

"I don't know. You'd better keep me in your

dream world, my dear. I don't suppose the woman you saw in me then, is really the woman you would find, if . . . " She broke off her sentence in the middle, and looked out across the glistening, shadowy, mysterious garden. "I'm a very human, tiresome woman, Gilbert, and you won't be able to mould me as you might a girl half my age . . . don't you imagine it. I was taught 'repose' in my youth," she went on, "but you, you great restless, worriting, dissatisfied thing! Dreams are safest for you, dear. I warn you."

He sat at her feet and laid his head against her knees. "*O Biondina*" he sang, "*come la va? Senza la vela la barca non va!*" Then he took her two hands and looked up at her, trying with desperation to climb that "garden wall," to see into her heart. In the sitting-room behind them, the lamp on the table diffused a yellow radiance, the light of actuality contrasting with the moon's transfiguring, white, unearthly radiance.

"José," he said, softly.

She smiled down at him, smiled with her blue eyes that now were dark, no less than with her lips. She smiled because she found him funny; and it was because he was so funny that she was tender towards him.

Suddenly he rose and slipped one arm round her waist and another under her knees and lifted her bodily from the chair. He had not guessed that she was so light. She did not resist him.

"Well now, you great thing!" she murmured. He laughed and carried her into the room and laid her gently on the sofa. "I've brought you away from the moon," he said. "Here are four friendly walls, dear, and the lamp alight on the table. I couldn't kiss you when you were so far away from me." She gave her mouth frankly rather than passionately, but her arm stole round his neck and held him close against her breast.

"You great male creature," she said, "why can't you leave me alone? What a bother and a nuisance you all are to be sure. Don't you know I've a lot of work to do without your worrying me?"

"So have I, dear. And I've every intention of doing it."

"Why do you want me then? You aren't in love with me?"

"I don't love you as a boy loves. But, in a queer way, you are home to me, José."

"I thought homes were out of fashion now—nasty prisons."

"Don't you know how Englishmen hate moving," he asked. "We want long leases, not short terms. I'm tired of all this moving about, sick of all this 'passion' and the life long love that lasts three months, and all the rest of it. I want to go home now."

"Well, you aren't a romantic lover, my dear!"

"I could be, José," he replied, "only you would shriek with laughter, you wretch."

"If you marry me you'll be marrying your grandmother. Don't forget that."

"You aren't any older than I am. . . ."

"Not in years, perhaps." Again she smiled.

"Would you feel better about it if we didn't marry?" he asked.

"No, I don't think so. I keep my word when I've given it, however hard. When man and woman live together it's always hard, at moments. One gets over the moments as a rule. One has to, if one has given one's word."

"You are depressing, José," said Gilbert, with a sigh. "Don't you believe there is such a thing as love?"

"Yes," she said, "but there's a great deal of difference between a girl's love and a woman's. Sometimes the one grows into the other. More often it does not. You and I are adults, my dear, and if we take each other for comrades, our love will show itself in loyalty. We must be faithful. . . . Oh, I'm not thinking of physical things. I shall be physically faithful to you because I haven't your desires and because I have a little more control. Women have to acquire that, you know. What I mean is *real* fidelity. The foundation stone must be well and truly laid, dear, if we are going to build anything worth having."

"You are my home, José," said Gilbert. "Don't shut the door in my face."

"If I am your home, I won't be your prison,"

she murmured, "and you mustn't make yourself mine. But I wonder if you really have suffered enough to be able to settle down? It takes some doing for a man like you—you restless, dissatisfied creature!"

"Of course I have," said Gilbert, laying his cheek against her breast. "We'll grow tomatoes in the conservatory for Margery to eat, and we'll have two babies, one of each . . ."

"It's a mother you want to make me then, is it? As if we weren't egoists enough without indulging in the incontinent egoism of having children."

José was silent for a while. Then suddenly she kissed him on the lips.

"Perhaps we need each other, my dear one," she murmured. "We'll do our best."

"Then you won't send me away from you again?" Gilbert asked. "Never again, from this moment?"

"No, dear, I won't send you away," José answered, and her arms held him tightly. "I won't send you away—but whether we are right or not, and what is going to happen to us, nobody knows."

THE END